

Cultural Theory

A F T E R

the Contemporary

Stephen **T**umino



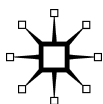
# CULTURAL THEORY AFTER THE CONTEMPORARY



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*Stephen Tumino*

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*For Cristina and Salvatore*



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## INTRODUCTION

In his influential essay “The Centrality of Culture,” Stuart Hall writes that our time is one of “‘cultural revolution’ in the substantive, empirical and material senses of the word. Substantively, the domain constituted by the activities, institutions and practices we call ‘culture’ has expanded out of all recognition” (209). Never before has “culture” been as conspicuous as the present. Everything—including, as Fredric Jameson argues, nature and the unconscious (*Postmodernism*)—is seen as “cultural” now, and the older sense of culture—as the opposite of natural and singular because created/creative—loses its meaning. Everything from diseases and genetics to happiness and war is now made a matter of social construction, and its workings are analyzed in terms of signifying practices and differences. Such a highly reflexive understanding of culture assumes that “language is constitutive of that which it names” (Barker, *Making Sense of Cultural Studies* 3). Culture is made into a rhetorical figure of Derridean undecidability as it “can be both a descriptive and evaluative term,” as Terry Eagleton argues, and is taken as a sign that the world has moved beyond the binaries of history, such as naturalism and idealism, freedom and necessity, consciousness and spontaneity, contingency and necessity (*The Idea of Culture* 5). And yet, this discursive view of culture gives a highly reified understanding of the social that separates it entirely from the underlying labor relations people must inhabit in order to live, especially the ruthless binary of class. The fundamental separation of culture from the economic in the discourse theory of culture normalizes the existing social inequality as a matter of lifestyles and self-fashioning in the marketplace (Chaney, *Lifestyles*). It also formalizes culture itself by treating it as a self-enclosed and auto-intelligible practice. The canonic all-is-culture theory of the social almost always leads to one conclusion: “The old distinction which classical Marxism used to make between the economic ‘base’ and the ideological ‘super-structure’ is difficult to sustain in circumstances where the media

both form a critical part of the material infrastructure of modern societies and are a principal means by which ideas and images are circulated” (Hall, “The Centrality of Culture” 209).

*Cultural Theory After the Contemporary* is a rigorous inquiry into the common sense of contemporary cultural theory and an effort to articulate a materialist cultural theory as an alternative to the common sense. Cultural theory, I believe, in focusing on the immanence of culture separate from economics, has ultimately separated culture entirely from the labor relations and conflicts in which it is always involved. It has become so focused on the details of culture and cultural difference that it cannot address cultural difference except on its own immanent terms. It has therefore been increasingly unable, I will suggest, to account for the new complexities of culture in relation to the emerging global class dynamics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. I will argue that by developing a labor theory of culture it becomes possible to address not only the immanent specifics of culture but culture’s relation to its outside, which I think provides for a more comprehensive analysis of culture. I will do so by a sustained and comprehensive engagement with major contemporary theories of culture and by reading specific texts of theorists such as Georg Lukács, Fredric Jameson, Tom Cohen, Slavoj Žižek, and Antonio Negri, whose work have transformed the vocabularies and interpretive strategies of contemporary cultural theory.

I realize that to argue for a labor theory of culture today is to write against the grain of cultural theory. I will therefore spend some time closely analyzing some of the central assumptions undergirding culturalism as a basis for advancing a labor theory of culture in the contemporary. The self-situating of the labor theory of culture is important because almost all contemporary cultural theories regard themselves to be material, if not materialist. The question of what makes materiality in cultural theory is therefore a central question of this book. I mostly focus on (post)modern North-Atlantic cultural theory and look at the way the relation of culture to materiality has been deployed in the texts of Immanuel Kant, Roger Scruton, Tom Cohen, Slavoj Žižek, and Antonio Negri in order to explore the need for my own labor theory of culture. Closely related to the question of materiality is the question of what constitutes a theory of culture. One of my arguments will be that theory as description of the textual surfaces of culture has taken the place of theory as an explanation of culture in the humanities today. Explanation is usually considered a totalitarian act of closure because it is a causal understanding of practices and phenomena that contains an implicit claim to Truth

(capital T) that is thus the arch-binary of truth and falsehood. Since Nietzsche's critique of causality (*The Will to Power* 293–300), cultural critique has moved away from explanation and embraced description as a mode of knowing that “interprets” culture in its own terms but refuses to relate it to an “outside” (i.e., cause). *Cultural Theory After the Contemporary* returns to theory as explanation and will therefore make extensive use of the classical texts of materialist cultural theory such as those of Marx and Engels, which prioritize causal understandings of culture. My use of these texts will be to elaborate a materialist cultural theory and distinguish it from different understandings of materialism in the humanities today, which are mostly descriptive and against explanation.

I distinguish between three forms of cultural theory according to the mode in which they theorize materiality: materiality as in opposition to culture (humanist), as synonymous with culture (discursive), and, as the basis of culture (materialist). Using melodrama as a focus—which is normally taken to foreground the affective in daily life and undermine all (ideo)logics—in chapter 2 I distinguish between these forms of cultural theory in more detail. These different modes of materiality in cultural theory cut across intellectual and political differences such as Marxism or deconstruction. There have been “humanist” marxisms as well as “materialist” understandings of reactionary thought, for example.<sup>1</sup> These modes of intelligibility are therefore more effectively understood historically. Raymond Williams's theorization of “residual,” “dominant,” and “emergent” structures of feeling (*Marxism and Literature* 121–7) will help explain what I mean. In Williams's terms, the intelligibility of cultural forms is dependent on their relative degree of incorporation into the hegemonic order—an incorporation that according to him is finally impossible—and not simply a matter of the formal specification of characteristics supposedly delineating different styles of thought. The importance of such a conceptualization of culture is that it provides an explanatory understanding of culture that can uncover the material forces that enable social change rather than a merely descriptive analytics that fails to penetrate the surface of culture. Thus “humanism,” for instance, is “residual” in the contemporary not because, as mainstream commentary would have it, it has been eclipsed by postmodern thought. In actuality the fundamental assumptions of humanism in cultural theory about the place of the subject in the social have been called into question by new social forces and developments, such as a globalization and the multicultural workforce, that have thrown its self-evidencies, such as the idea

that culture unites society above and beyond its material differences, into crisis. In short, I am arguing that humanism is more effectively read as symptomatic of a total cultural moment explained by a social basis outside the cultural superstructure, what Williams, following Marx, calls its “mode of production” (*Marxism and Literature* 125), a basis that cultural practices help legitimate and organize but without which they lose their ability to provide the subject with a sense of the rational and the real. For example, humanism was a cultural dominant (i.e., “made sense”) when the historic task was to establish a common market within the boundaries of the nation-state, but it ceased to be so when the task was to establish a global market beyond the sovereign power of any single nation-state. Postmodern modes of intelligibility are now culturally dominant in transnational capitalism, but its assumptions about culture are themselves in crisis under the impact of an emergent materialist cultural theory, as I will discuss. For example, the idea that culture testifies to an “incredulity toward grand narratives” (Lyotard) is not only logically problematic as a truth claim but, more importantly, historically problematic under the global dominance of the neoliberal regime of capital accumulation imposed by such organizations as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund.

Theory since Plato has been an inquiry into the “essence” behind appearances. At this level of generality, however, there would appear to be no difference between Plato’s “timeless” and spiritual understanding of essence, for example, and Marx’s inquiry into the economic laws of motion of social formations. Discursive theory has formalized theory and translated its inquiry into the causes behind phenomena into the “metaphysics of presence,” the belief in an “extra-discursive” essence, and has thus blurred the lines between idealist theory and materialist theory. Theory is now “radical” when it unfixes binaries such as inside/outside by translating them into multiple significations that proliferate the pleasures of the text beyond all master codes. But what kind of reading pleasure is this that suppresses the contestation on the first premises of theory and fails to consider the very different practical conclusions that follow from whether one believes that the world is a reflection of ideas or, conversely, that ideas reflect material conditions?<sup>2</sup> If the world is conditioned by ideas, ending inequality would simply be a matter of changing ideas (enlightenment), which, for all its opposition to the Enlightenment, is what discursivist theory itself argues: the composite writer J. K. Gibson-Graham, for example, argues in *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)* that inequality will end with the end of “capital-centrism”—a change in language.

Conversely, if ideas are seen in the context of social inequality and unequal access to resources, then changes at the level of ideas must be understood as secondary reflections of more primary changes in the struggle over material resources: “ideas that revolutionize society...express the fact...that the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence” (Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” 489).

There are important cultural issues raised by the basic difference in theory as well. In viewing a film, for example, do we “identify” with the “characters” and the ups and downs of their “story,” or are we being placed ideologically in relation to corporate power and given to think that ideas shape the world we see? Is *Seabiscuit* (dir. Gary Ross 2003), for instance, the story of the triumph of the human spirit (in a horse?) over all obstacles that empowers its viewers with a sense of the possible, or is it about how “spirit” itself is an obstacle to entrepreneurial freedom in a “posthumanist” present that demands new ethical subjectivities to mitigate the social and environmental costs of global capitalism? What is a text anyway? Is it a figural arrangement of tropes more or less “aesthetically” arranged to confuse “reference with phenomenism” as Paul de Man writes, or is it an “arena of class struggle” as Vološinov argues? And, what about language itself? Is it an arbitrary construct “without positive terms” (Saussure) or a product of labor that embodies positive knowledge (Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*)? These questions of course assume the possibility of decided answers grounded in reliable foundations (“essence”) and thus raise the question of the need for theory. But theory as an inquiry into origins is today declared to be dead. Theory is labeled “spectral” by the theorists themselves (Derrida, *Specters of Marx*; Sprinker, *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. Michael Sprinker) on the grounds that theory is “essentialist” while in the contemporary its foundations have disappeared. Leaving aside for the moment that anti-foundationalism is itself a foundation, discursivist theory has made the specter of theory the limit text of theory and claimed that this “unconditional” theory, which is supposed to exist without foundations, is the most radical theory because it rejects the dogmatic. By disconnecting theory from the class relations that shape culture, however, theory has come to be the most dogmatic assertion that the way things are is incontestable. Theory has been turned from being an inquiry into the conditions of knowing, from which a transformative understanding of the totality is produced, into an ornament of speculation and the legitimization of “spiritual” solutions for inequality, which has placed theory in crisis. As a result, the theorists have in their statements become



indistinguishable from the traditional humanists they once distanced themselves from, for whom theory simply interferes with aesthetic pleasure.

The question of the “popular” is central to ongoing debates in cultural studies. This is not only because of the serious consequences its theorization has for social praxis in shaping the emergent globality in the wake of the antiglobalization movement, but, more importantly, because in capitalism “popular” is used to hide class antagonism (through such descriptive concepts as “status” and “lifestyle,” for example). In chapter 2, in the context of my discussion of melodrama, I argue for an oppositional and enabling theory of the popular as the other of pluralism. Pluralism, as in the semiotic democracy of the cultural left, alibis the totalitarianism of the free market, which is based on wage slavery of the many for the profit of a few. What is popular, I will argue, is not a question of subjectivity (freedom of speech) but of objectivity (economic freedom)—not a matter of political desire but of material need. It is not popular, in other words, to occult consciousness of the class antagonism in society but an elitist bourgeois practice that maintains exploitation. However, what is “radical” now is precisely a post-class understanding of the popular that alibis class inequality, as the contemporary discussion of melodrama as a zone of pure affect demonstrates. For this reason, I will argue that for a truly radical cultural studies it is necessary to provide “root” knowledge of the social (Marx and Engels, *Reader* 60)—knowledge of the social relations of production (“class”)—against the complexification (masked as analytical subtlety) and the fetishism of singularities (that supports a “free” market ideology of agency), which make up the populist reason of “post-al”<sup>3</sup> capitalism in the knowledge industry. Root knowledge is necessary in order to foreground the binary in the “popular” between popular-as-populist post-class ideology and popular-as-class critique. The blending and blurring of the binary provides support to the ruling class by dehistoricizing and normalizing capitalist subjectivities and displacing the historical “outside” (socialism) with a pietistic “beyond” (utopia).

Melodrama has always been a site of the “class struggle at the level of theory” (Althusser, *Essays*) where the populist sentimentality and critique-al knowledge of the social have fought it out. This is not surprising because, as one critic puts it, melodrama has been a popular way to “deal with the dynamics of early capitalist economics” (Elsaesser 73) and now, under the libertarian populism of the market pedagogy in global capitalism, “society . . . is more and more splitting up into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and

Proletariat” (Marx and Engels, *Reader* 474). In the market pedagogy, the “popularity” of melodrama has been considered a matter of its formal plurality and made central to understanding the form. This displacement of the primary (class) by the secondary (form) takes various forms. It has, for example, been claimed that melodramas are “spectacular, and based on broad appeal” (Elsaesser 75) or, similarly, because they originally were “written for a public that extended from the lower classes . . . through all sectors of the middle class, and even embraced members of the aristocracy” (Brooks xvi), they cannot be properly read in terms of class conflict. Or in a somewhat different language it has been argued that melodrama has “served as a crucial space in which the cultural, political, and economic exigencies . . . were played out and transformed into public discourses” (Hays and Nikolopoulou viii), which is simply another way of stating the cultural obvious that because melodrama is “powered by emotion” it is “liberating for people” (Lang 20) to consume it. In another register, others have occulted the material basis of melodrama in the class structure by appealing to its “insistence on the importance of the ordinary” and the “everyday” as a site of “desire” (Byars 11), or its formal “irony” in structuring “experience” in such a way that “ignorance of the properly social and political dimensions of these changes [social crises] and their causality” is given “symbolic plausibility” (Elsaesser 72–3) by being placed on an “existential level” (86). In these ways the material basis of melodrama in class conflict has been occulted by reifying the form of melodrama. To say these formal aspects of melodrama are secondary considerations is not to deny that culturalist theory of melodrama is internally constituted by a local division over whether the popularity of melodrama is thought to be due to its being a transparent representation of people’s “lived experience,” or, rather, because it is a simulacra, a post-mimetic representation that displays the constructedness of the real (a regional contradiction I engage within the text). It is only by making the class politics of melodrama primary, however, that the cultural struggles can be clarified and melodrama provide an occasion to produce root knowledge and radical subjectivities capable of engaging in the praxis of social change.

What I call “(post)melodrama” is essential to such a critique. Such a concept is needed to mark the ensemble of practices that diffuses culture into an empty plurality of consumer attachments that makes the populist common sense of global capitalism that agency is a matter of knowledge (values) not praxis (labor). The critique of the contemporary (post)melodrama will also provide a theorization of what

in the discourses of Marxism has been put forward as a popular melodrama in which the class conflicts over the real are made central to transforming cultural practices for revolutionary change.

In chapter 2 I outline how the historical shifts in the discussion of melodrama reveal the political economy of the “subject” and agency under capitalism and thus explain that what appears to be a debate over the politics of the popular in the dominant writings is in actuality an interclass debate about which subjectivities better alibi the ruling class and facilitate the construction of a compliant workforce. Later in the chapter I will demonstrate the effectiveness of this theorization in reading the (post)melodramatic text of *The Butcher Boy* (dir. Neil Jordan, 1997).

The second chapter also begins to analyze humanist cultural theory more closely by reading some of its central tutor-texts, those of Plato and Kant. In Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* the aesthetic is considered “pure” and “disinterested” and is made a kind of experience prior to conceptuality as well as a necessary precondition of understanding. His view indicates a late shift in the Enlightenment project to the primacy of the senses over reason and has been used, by Lyotard and de Man, for instance, to argue for a theory of materiality as in excess of concepts. Besides indicating a late shift in humanist thought that devalues reason, Kant’s aesthetic turn is an important moment in the genealogy of culturalism that is widely seen as leading, from Spinoza on through Nietzsche, toward a (post)modern materialism focused on the body.

So dominant is the theory of materiality authorized by Kant’s third critique that it shapes as well the writings of contemporary conservative critics such as Roger Scruton, who is supposedly opposed to postmodernism. I will also investigate Scruton’s cultural theory as a contemporary humanist approach, which argues that culture reflects a timeless human essence (spirit) opposed to the modern forces of materiality (consumer society). In this way I propose to show that humanist theories of culture, such as Kant’s and Scruton’s, presume the same ahistorical theory of materiality one finds among postmodern theorists who argue for the materiality of signs as an allegory of the opacity of desire.

In order to further explain the ideological coincidence of humanist and discursive cultural theory more closely, I will engage the writings of Tom Cohen in chapter 3. Cohen understands materiality as cultural “inscription” and argues that the real is an effect of signification. Cohen rejects all other theories of materiality as ideological because they are more or less “mimetic” and lack the kind of

discursive self-reflexivity he thinks makes the writings of de Man in particular culturally radical. His own writings show, however, that more important than surface differences over mimesis is the deep commitment of culturalism against a materialist cultural theory that foregrounds class in culture, an antagonism that unites the otherwise intellectually opposed positions of humanist and discursive cultural theory against classical Marxism, as I will explain by comparing Cohen's discourse with the writings of Hannah Arendt.

What Cohen's writings thus show, despite themselves, is that at stake in the debates over mimesis is not mimesis but different ways of knowing the world that have different and opposed political consequences in terms of the ongoing class conflicts over the cultural real. To clarify this point, I will look at a specific cultural reading that Cohen proposes as a model for discursivist cultural studies, his reading of Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*.

So as to make my arguments above regarding culture as a site of conflict over materiality more concrete in chapter 3, I also consider Franz Kafka's writing as an example of the crisis of the contemporary totality. Kafka's writings and their "readings" have become not only a layered cultural signpost but also a threshold in critical and cultural theory. In their readings of Kafka, Lukács and Derrida, two of his most careful readers, bring out not only the complexities of his texts but also mark the way in which the act of reading itself has become a complex and materially consequential cultural practice. Kafka is usually seen as the opposite of a "realistic" writer because of the attenuated view of the world in his texts and the impossibility of an authentic human response to the conditions they represent. This view fails to read Kafka as reflecting on social relations because it conflates reflection with "reference" and concludes that because his writing lacks systemic awareness of society and modalities of change it must be read in "existential" or "metaphysical" terms that are commonsensically assumed to be above politics and free of class ideology. Conversely, I will show how in the spectrality of its details Kafka's text registers the fact that capitalism as it develops must alienate all social activity and productions to serve the rule of profit so that nothing in the end is able to remain a local and self-enclosed activity but rather entails an invisible (but global) system of production. I will argue that Kafka follows a culturalist logic by surfacing the contradictions of daily life under monopoly capitalism while mystifying any causal systemic explanation for them. What the culturalist reading of Kafka is blind to and what materialist reading emphasizes, however, is the textual resistance in the texts of Kafka to the system of monopoly capitalism,

which transforms daily life into a regimented life regulated by the logic of the commodity (exchange value)—Kafka’s symbolic protest of culture as “mere training to act like a machine” (Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”), which provides the index of labor in his text.

Across chapters 2 and 3, I give a genealogy of culturalism in terms of its engagement with materialism and social relations, demonstrating how the opposition of culture and materiality in humanist theory was critiqued by discursive cultural theory while at the same time the primary ideological function of maintaining the immanence of culture as separate from labor relations has been preserved. More recently, culturalism is itself being contested and is under pressure because of the sharp economic antagonisms structuring daily life. This has given rise to a renewed interest in those theories that claim to provide a theory of culture that takes the economic into account. Here the neo-marxist theories of materiality of Jameson and Negri are of significance and will be investigated in chapter 2. While providing a political economic critique of the dominant cultural theory, their articulation of the economic and the labor relations is, in fact, limited. In opposition, I argue that it is necessary to return to the understanding of labor found in the texts of classical Marxism. Such a view of labor provides a more effective understanding of culture (as, for example, found in the writings of Lenin and Lukács) and provides the founding notions for a labor theory of culture.

Like all other modes and forms of cultural theory, the very theoretical identity of Marxism is itself contested, of course—not just from non- and anti-Marxists who question the very “real” (by which they mean the “effective” as under free-market criteria) existence of any kind of Marxism now but, perhaps more tellingly, from within the Marxist tradition itself. In chapter 3, therefore, I also outline what I regard to be the distinguishing marks of orthodox Marxism, which I will later elaborate as providing the core of a materialist cultural theory. Here I will put forward the ideas of a labor theory of culture, such as “labor,” “value,” “surplus value,” “capital,” “commodity,” and “production,” through a reading of Marx’s *Capital*, and I will counterpose these ideas to the revisionist discourses of the humanist and post-contemporary marxisms authorized by the writings of Rosemary Hennessy and Slavoj Žižek, respectively. I argue that the “culturalism” of the dominant cultural theory denies not only history and the materiality of culture but also “agency”—that is, how men and women make history and change the social relations and themselves through their productive activity, or what Marx calls

“socially necessary labor.” Culture as self-made and auto-intelligible is, in other words, a form of understanding that foreshortens any historical understanding of culture and its place in shaping the contemporary. In chapter 3 I will also explore the possibility of a different form of cultural studies, one located in the history and materiality of culture and committed to foregrounding the agency of labor. By “labor” I do not mean a superstructural mediation, the “constitutive power” Negri, for example, locates in high-tech “affective labor,” or the “lived experience” of class that E. P. Thompson finds in the consumption habits of working people. I mean labor as a social relation, specifically the ratio between the time required for necessary labor and the time of coerced surplus labor that inaugurates the exploitation central to capitalism and that explains its central contradiction: the antagonism between profit (exchange value) and need (use value).

In chapter 2 I continue the practice of embedding the debates over materiality in the context of everyday life. For this purpose I analyze the retrospective exhibit and reception of Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster Cycle* at the Guggenheim Museum in 2003 as a limit-text of materiality in transnational capitalism and tease out its class politics. The *Cremaster Cycle* provides an important occasion to inquire into the ongoing debates in cultural theory around questions of materiality and agency. This is because of the way the work is committed to a logic of excess that seems to defy conceptual boundaries and thus apparently produces a space of freedom for the subject in the daily, while in the process immunizing the social relations from an ideology critique, by (re)turning to class struggle as merely a trope of desire, for example. However, I also propose to read the *Cremaster Cycle* as a modality of labor because of how the way it challenges multicultural and postmodern cultural politics—by returning to conflictual understandings of the social totality for instance—and transforms the cultural real in accordance with the emergent material needs of global capitalism. I will argue that such a densely layered text as the *Cremaster Cycle* provides a lesson in global literacy that has become historically necessary under transnational capitalism in ways that were first announced in materialist cultural theory in texts such as *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* and *The German Ideology*. It produces this dialectical effect by evacuating all conceptual binaries of their historicity by relaying them through a thick network of multiple significations that is framed in the cultural imaginary, as the public reception of the work shows, as exceeding ideological closure but that are in actuality a

socially necessary ensemble of consciousness skills, a global subjectivity, in the global factory.

The value of a materialist cultural theory is its integrated view of culture in the social formation and opposition to all one-sided and reified understandings. As Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez has explained, what gives to materialist cultural theory its explanatory power is the recognition that culture is at root labor. Labor, not as “work... a merely economic category” (42), in the sense that Negri understands culture as “immaterial labor,” but labor as what Vázquez calls “artistic concreteness” (32)—“a particular form of creative work” (*Art and Society* 42) whose object is to shape women and men themselves: “man is the specific object of art even if he is not always the object of artistic representation” (31). Vázquez theorizes culture as providing a certain kind of knowing that enables men and women to change reality. This is primarily a result of the fact that culture transforms the material world in such a way as to “capture... human reality in its essential aspects and tear... off the veil of its mystification” (34) thus providing the necessary consciousness skills (theory as explanation) required for broader transformations. Because of its “artistic concreteness” as demystification, culture may act as a critique of the “objective concreteness” of science as well and militate against the reified view of things that science takes under capitalism, which is a one-sided view of self-enclosed processes with no relation to human social relations and needs. Vázquez himself may participate in such reification, but only insofar as his conception of “artistic concreteness” is tied to the idea of “an artistic structure or totality that has its own set of laws” (24) that are universal. How is such a transhistorical theory of materiality itself not the same as the reified materiality that Vázquez attributes to science? In chapter 2 I investigate the status of materiality in materialist cultural theory and contemporary culture in order to conceptualize a more historical theory of materiality for cultural theory than he seems to allow: The material as class. Materialism is the opposite of reification not because it represents Hegel’s “infinite judgment” (the coincidence of total knowledge and the empirical standpoint) as Žižek argues—which is actually what Lukács meant by “class consciousness,” the proletariat as the identical subject-object—but because class represents the totality as the “concrete... concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse” (Marx, *Grundrisse* 101). Class is material because it is the base-ic ongoing reality of the capitalist mode of production.

Cultural theory has always located itself in terms of its contemporaneity. For instance, conventional appearances are understood

by Plato in terms of their underlying logical preconditions, which are only accessible to philosophical inquiry in the here and now. According to Hegel, for another, “modernity” consists of the universal questioning and the relentless testing of foundations in terms of reason. Hegel’s emphasis on the agency of human intellect (“the labor of the concept”) in modernity led him to a discursive understanding of history: “Our culture is essentially comprehensive and immediately changes all events into historical representations” (*Philosophy of History*). History, on Hegel’s account, is the cultural medium in which Spirit materializes itself. Derrida, summarizing Hegel, has made history into textuality and concluded that it is never self-identical to its own Idea, as Hegel believed. We are always “post-contemporary” (as in the Duke University series edited by Jameson and Fish), not because, as Hegel thought, understanding always comes after experience (the owl of Minerva flies only at dusk), but because contemporaneity is never available to us without mediations, which are always subject to *différance*, according to Derrida. History is thus never present to itself, as it is always mediated by spacing; the writing of history exceeds any determinate logic. History, in deconstruction, is not the incessant questioning of foundations so much as it is the sign of a desire for an impossible foundation existing beyond cultural difference. Under deconstruction, the contemporary is thus “blasted out of the continuum of history” by the “weak Messianic power” of desire unregulated by any cultural norm (Benjamin, “Philosophy of History”) and becomes a “hauntology” (Derrida, *Specters of Marx*) of traces. In such a discursive framework that has deregulated history after the “post” and made it unavailable as positive and reliable knowledge, cultural theory has embraced a religiosity to escape the judgment of history in the return of the repressed of class.

Increasing unevenness in capitalist relations, which have, for example, led to the current financial crisis, have normalized an ethical/religious turn in the humanities and led to “new” theories that could account for the rising inequalities in cultural terms. Post-structuralism lost its explanatory power with the waning of neoliberal policies and its monetarist economics in the 1990s. Negri’s theory of the “multitude,” for instance, which accounts for inequality as exclusion from the circuits of “immaterial labor,” and Agamben’s juridical account of inequality as a “state of exception” to democratic norms are prominent among the “new” theories (Hall, *New Cultural Studies*). What these new-er theories highlight is the way “knowledge economy” increases the alienation



of labor and therefore the alienation of humans from humans. In the last chapter I give a reading of the “new cultural studies” and look at how they understand and respond to the waning of post-structuralist theory. Insofar as these theories account for inequality immanently from within culture, they heighten the awareness of differences within commonsense notions about the social totality and the way such ideas naturalize inequality by the exclusion of “others.” In more middle register writings, the discourses of the new materialist theory produce an uncomfortable sense of alienation that embraces analytical undecidability as a way to overcome it, and so one finds increasing calls for a return to deconstruction as the savior of cultural studies (Cohen, Grossberg, G. Hall, and J. H. Miller). Cultural theory now is a vacillation between a mourning for the residual theory (deconstruction), which cannot face up to its incorporation as the dominant, and the dream of “making its ghost walk again,” as Marx puts it in the “Eighteenth Brumaire,” on the part of a Messianic left that wants to reactivate the activist spirit of theory against its own institutionalization in the post-al knowledge industry, most prominently in the writings of Agamben, Badiou, Žižek, and Hardt and Negri. The new theory is part of a broader ethical turn in culture that addresses the growing global class inequality in religious terms. Following Benjamin’s thesis of the “weak Messianic power” hidden within historical materialism, the transatlantic left puts forward a messianic conception of materialism in which Saint Paul displaces Lenin as the figure through which to inscribe movement outside capitalism as “pure voluntarism” (Žižek, *First as Tragedy*).<sup>4</sup> Their notion of materialism, I argue, is ultimately not very different than the dominant culturalism that they formally oppose, as it represents the attempt to revive the old cultural revolution of the ’60s in the surfaces of the daily, rather than surface why, through the working of historical necessity, capitalism has “simplified the class antagonisms...into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (“Manifesto of the Communist Party”). Once again we are witness to the reality that capitalism must undermine its own law of value as once again it has brought about another crisis of overproduction in which masses of wealth exist alongside growing immiseration, as Marx explained was its systemic tendency. It is the working through of this structural dynamic of the capitalist mode of production that is today making orthodox Marxist critique a material force (just look at the international boom in sales of *Das Kapital* since the crash of 2008). My last chapter in this work investigates the vacillations of cultural theory

now as it attempts to justify its radical credentials while embracing its own commodification in the context of the crisis of capitalism—*Cultural Theory After the Contemporary* as in the movement beyond the dissimulations of capital masquerading as radical now and for ceaseless critique for international socialism.



## CULTURE AND ITS OUTSIDE

### CULTURALISM

One of the mainstays of contemporary cultural theory is the argument that the social is primarily shaped by culture. Culture, that is, not as a collection of artifacts or an archive of progress, but, rather, following the writings of Antonio Gramsci, as “an arena of consent and resistance” (Stuart Hall, “Deconstructing” 239) over the shape of the social. Contemporary cultural theory has extended the understanding of culture beyond universalist and, therefore, supposedly elitist assumptions and normative hegemonic conclusions and instead focused on culture as “the articulation and activation of meaning” (Storey xiii), on the grounds that it is primarily discourse that possesses “the power and the authority to define social reality” (Storey xii). The meanings in a culture that both secure and contest the dominant social arrangements are thought to lie in what Michel de Certeau calls “secondary production” (Storey xiii), which is the sphere of consumption, rather than originating in the economic sphere of production. In these terms, it is the “consumer who in effect ‘produces in use’” (Storey xiii) the meanings of the culture that determine social reality. So much has such a focus on the daily practices of consumption and identification and been “central to the project of cultural studies” (Storey xi) that some have simply argued that “cultural studies could be described...perhaps more accurately as ideological studies” (James Carey quoted in Storey xii). In cultural theory the focus on the constitutive power of discourse to define social reality has shifted the attention of cultural studies from the wider social relations of production that shape consumption and, as I will argue, in fact determine the social real.

The assumption that consumption is more important than production, which has steadily shaped cultural theory since the '60s, has become the common sense of both cultural theory and daily culture

itself. And, like all commonsense assumptions, the assumption of the priority of culture over class, which I will refer to as “culturalism,” has gained the status of a self-evident fact. In this chapter I offer a sustained inquiry into the common sense of culturalism and an articulation of a labor theory of culture. The aim is not only to offer a labor theory of culture as an “alternative” interpretation of culture, but also to explain why culturalism has become dominant, inquire into what its material effects and limits are, and study what its relation to the existing social arrangements is.

Cultural theory, I believe, has become so focused on the details of culture and cultural difference that it cannot address cultural difference except on the culturalist terms described above. Cultural theory has ultimately insulated culture entirely from the labor relations and conflicts in which it is always involved. People’s “lifestyles” (which is another way of referring to the commodities they consume and how they consume them) are assumed to be more significant, in these terms, than the labor relations they must enter into as a necessary precondition of consumption. Such an assumption concludes that the markers and beliefs that position individuals in culture as men and women, black, latino, gay, and so on are more important than the fact that they are wage workers who must first sell themselves daily to capital before they can acquire the cultural markers of identity. My argument in this text is that by developing a labor theory of culture it becomes possible to address not only the specificities of culture focused on exclusively by the culturalist approach but also culture’s relation to its “outside,” that is, the labor arrangements. An examination of this, I think, provides for a more comprehensive analysis of culture and will return cultural theory to being what Marx called a “material force,” because it produces root knowledge of inequality (Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*). Such an understanding of the priority of the economic is seen on the cultural left as “Left Conservatism” (Butler, Bové, et. al.) because it (supposedly) forecloses on differences. But, as Teresa L. Ebert has argued, “differences in class societies are always exploitative” (*Ludic Feminism* 169; *Cultural Critique* 157–8) because they serve to divide and segment the working class and foster competition between the workers. What is needed in cultural theory is not more thick description of difference but its critique.

The theorization of culturalism I provide in this chapter contests the “insider” story usually told about its emergence, which in one way or another posits history as changes in knowledge and maintains that a break in the order of knowledge has occurred that suspends the

laws of motion of capitalism that explain culture as a superstructural phenomena (i.e., ideology as false consciousness of the economic). The most popular and therefore taken for granted story that contemporary culture forms a self-enclosed area of shifting meanings and values unconnected to class relations is the “globalization” story. In different articulations “globalization” is taken as the dominance of the market over areas once believed to be sacred or natural. In this story, capitalism is seen as a liberating force that frees human desire from any normative constraints. Through the manufacturing of endless choices in the marketplace, this story assumes, people are made to believe that objective reality itself is simply a matter of “free choice,” and they are thereby empowered to change the world.<sup>1</sup> Social conflicts, on this logic, are treated as basically moral conflicts over rival interpretations about the world at a time when positive knowledge of the world is held to be unavailable because it has dissolved in the matrices of exchange and is subject to constant renegotiation. Perhaps the most popular exponent of this view is *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, who has simply popularized ideas that had their beginnings in Nietzsche’s writings (which argue that a historic reversal of values has occurred that has orphaned all meanings and rendered them essentially ironic), which have since made their way through the writings of the Frankfurt School, Daniel Bell, Francis Fukuyama, Jean Baudrillard, and Anthony Giddens, to name a few.

According to Friedman, in the year 2000 the world entered a “whole new era” (*The World is Flat* 10) because of a fortuitous “convergence” (10) of technologies and market forces that made the world “flat,” because “it is now possible for more people than ever to collaborate and compete in real time with more other people on more different kinds of work from more different corners of the planet and on a more equal footing than at any previous time in the history of the world” (8). In the “new” flat world it is culture—in the form of “software, brainpower, complex algorithms, knowledge workers, call centers, transmission protocols, [and] breakthroughs in optical engineering” (4)—that constitutes “the source of wealth” (4) and “explain[s] what [is] happening in the world today” (7), and not the conflict between capital and labor. For neoliberals like Friedman, as it is for leftists such as Negri and Hardt, “knowledge work” is a code for more “cooperative” transnational systems of production that are taken to constitute a basically nonexploitative (“creative”) form of labor. All contemporary cultural theory makes this assumption that labor is no longer exploited because it is “cooperative” and “creative” knowledge-work, usually on the assumption that work is

now “postindustrial” and “post-Fordist” and therefore organized in a nonhierarchical way. Implicit in “knowledge work” is the assumption that labor is an experiential matter defined by the type of work engaged in, rather than a social relation between classes. However, unlike work, which takes place in a specific location and expends labor power on a set of given materials for a particular end, labor is an abstract social process that can only be set in motion through the combined activity of the whole society. The claim that contemporary society is defined by “knowledge work” is a gross reification of labor, in which one particular kind of work (usually service work, which requires “affective” performance) is taken as a metaphor for social relations as a whole, while the basic class structure is removed from view and the social is emptied of its historicity. By turning labor into a metaphor of a highly reified experience of everyday life in cyber-capitalism, “labor” is given a conservative meaning whose function is to police the boundaries of knowledge by turning attention away from the exploitative basis of capitalism. Labor is actually exploitative at root. Labor is exploitative not because it is more or less coercive or creative but because it takes place in an economy in which the social means of production and the surplus it produces have been expropriated by a few who thereby force the majority to engage in surplus labor to produce profit for themselves. To call such a global social relation “cooperative” and “creative” is to mystify the exploitative basis of labor and turn cultural theory against the workers.

Because cyber-capitalism is seen as transcending class struggle in the economic base in “globalization,” the conflicts of today are themselves regarded as purely cultural, having nothing to do with the division of labor. Friedman, for example, argues that class is itself cultural. According to him, class is essentially a psychological matter: “class is a state of mind” (*The World is Flat* 461). What divides people, in other words, is not access to the material resources they need to live, but “hope”—whether they “believe they have a pathway out of poverty or lower-income status toward a higher standard of living and a better future for their kids” (461) or not. For Negri and Hardt too, class is essentially a cultural identity: “class is determined by class struggle” (*Multitude* 104). According to them “class is a political concept” (104), namely, autonomy or freedom, rather than an economic one (need). In culturalist theory, it is culture (hope, freedom) that explains inequality and not inequality that explains culture. For Friedman, “the line between those who are in the flat world and those who are not is this line of hope” (*The World is Flat* 461–2). The “hopeful” are “cooperative” with the imperatives of the

global economy and the hopeless are just “sick” (462) or demoralized by bad government (462). In this narrative of a “new” capitalism, culture is given a culturalist validation and the world is flattened to the terms of the market, where power no longer divides people and everything appears to be a matter of choices between morally free and equal persons. On this logic “the poor are actually extraordinarily wealthy” (Negri and Hardt, *Multitude* 131) because “despite the myriad mechanisms of hierarchy and subordination” they are “creative” and “express an enormous power of life” (129) by resisting power from above. Inequality is here assumed to be residual and past, while “now” is the time of creative self-expression and a newfound freedom. What is never examined in this familiar story, on which soap operas are based, is how the appearance of formal equality in the market hides beyond it the material inequality in production that actually explains culture and its differences and conflicts, which is caused by unequal access to material resources such as energy, housing, food, health care, and communications. By considering culture solely on its own terms, it is idealized as a series of emotional attachments to free-floating ideas that immunizes the division of labor from critique and pathologizes the contradictions of class society. In other words, rather than examining the ideological function of thoughts, ideas, desires, affects, experiences, and so on to legitimate and mystify class relations, culturalist theory reads culture on its own terms as simply concerning matters of personal belief with merely an emotional basis in order to construct the story of an eternal capitalism.

Friedman calls himself a “technological determinist” (*The World is Flat* 160) but then quickly clarifies that what he means is not that technology determines subjectivity—“Using them does not make you modern, smart, more wise, fair or decent”—but that it “just makes you able to communicate, compete, and collaborate farther and faster” (460). Leaving aside the fact that the changes he describes have of course already changed what it means to be “smart,” “fair,” and so on, if the experience of new technologies does not in itself produce a more progressive society in Friedman’s view of the world, the “hope” that it will eventually do so is assumed to be essential for a good society. However, such an empty “hope” without a causal basis in objective reality relies on a religious view of the world that transcodes the material conflicts arising out of class society into eternal cultural wars over beliefs, which is actually antithetical to the socially collaborative nature of the contemporary work process Friedman formally idealizes and celebrates. It is for this reason that Friedman must posit a “hope” in technology rather than religion, or



a spiritual interpretation of technology, so as to overcome the contradiction between the real social nature of work in the world today and the alienated consciousness actually produced by work in the context of market competition. But such an irrational reconciliation between the fact of modern technology and cultural values, as Friedman proposes, simply maintains the everyday alienated consciousness of both and fails to see them as grounded in the social relations of production. This would entail implicating technology and culture in the alienated nature of private property (exploitation), which is the objective cause of contemporary ideology. It is the coercive appropriation of the labor of others by a few that produces the view that technology is merely technical (associated with “work” and “making a living” rather than a part of “life” and “creative”) and that it does not have a historical tendency to “simplify” and revolutionize class relations, as “The Manifesto of the Communist Party” argues, because it deskills and impoverishes the worker while enriching the capitalist. For example, social networking technology is usually thought to be a mode of expanded communication, but in actuality it trains the workforce to be “self-managing” and to see the world in terms of “branding,” and it takes the pressure off business to provide a real cultural education to the workers, one that is not content centered but critique-al. The idea that culture is a free-floating realm of beliefs and passionate attachments that carry no trace of class interest and have no ideological consequences in maintaining class society is equally a product of the same material conditions of exploitation. It is exploitation that causes people to view what are in actuality social relations as relations between things, because the actual basis of society is mystified by the expropriation and command of the social wealth by a few. If the command and fruits of labor were also socialized, as its execution and discipline currently is, the alienated consciousness of culture (“life”) and technique (“work”) would dissolve and “the government of persons...[be] replaced by the administration of things” (Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* 106) undertaken on behalf of the “free association of producers” (Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”). Friedman’s formal contrasting of technology and culture is an ideological device to maintain that individuals are morally free and equal, but the categorical nature of this division places our humanity in a spiritual beyond and thereby actually reinforces the subjugation of people to their alienated existence, which in reality is caused by their lack of access to and control over their own social production. Freedom is not a cultural matter of belief or proudly maintaining “dignity” in the face of negative circumstances. Neither is it brought

about by redefining work as a “creative” act. Freedom is at root a matter of access to the material conditions of life and the free time it brings to help cultivate and appropriate the powers of social labor.

Another popular story about the rise of culturalism is really an inversion of the above narrative and is aimed at a different class fraction that, while critical of globalization, in some respects secretly maintains its culturalist terms. In this story—which is manufactured for the lower “middle classes” who are resentful at finding themselves proletarianized, rather than the entrepreneurial upper layer that Friedman is addressing and who still hopes to “make it”—everything is a matter of cultural conflicts, including the infrastructure of technology and market forces. This is the contemporary as understood by Foucault as the regime of “bio-power,” in which, he argues, “phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species” finally entered into “the sphere of political techniques” (*The History of Sexuality* 141–2). This view has become central to the writings of Hardt and Negri, such as *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*, which reflect the views of the North Atlantic antiglobalization movement. According to Foucault, the form of society had fundamentally changed during the eighteenth century and power was essentially redefined. From a subtractive “right of seizure” that subjected people and things to the imperatives of the State, the modality of power changed to a “productive” one in which individuals are disciplined by social institutions, such as the factory, school, and prison, so as to augment control over life and redefine it as a compulsive social norm. Because the “normalizing society” (144) legitimates itself in terms of improving “life” itself, first in opposition to the repressive rule previously reserved to the sovereign and then in terms of productivity and efficiency, all political conflicts since the eighteenth century, Foucault argues, tend to revolve around “basic needs, man’s concrete essence, [and] the realization of his potential” (145). Thus, for Foucault political demands for “basic needs” (145) do not fundamentally challenge the system as they “rel[y] for support on the very thing it invested, that is, on life and man as a living being” (144). Struggles over material life are thus re-understood by Foucault: rather than being fundamental to the system in the way Marx argued that they touched upon its very roots, they are assumed to be cultural struggles that take as a given the continued reproduction of capitalism. Since “power and knowledge assumed responsibility for the life processes” (142), bringing “its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations” (143), what really matters according to Foucault is not class struggles over resources but how life “constantly escapes” (143)

rational calculation and throws man's "existence as a living being in question" (143).

Actually the form of rule of capital, whether it be politically suppressive or juridically regulative, is explained by the need for the capitalist class to make profit from the labor of others and not some pathological desire to exercise power over life as such. The "excesses" of bio-power such as the atomic bomb and microbiology, which cause Foucault to revise the classical definition of man as a "rational animal" on the grounds that "modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question" (*The History of Sexuality* 143), are not irrational "excesses" from the point of view of profit accumulation, which is the true norm under capitalism and not efficiency or productivity. If productivity, the control of forces for the meeting of the requirements of life, and the proliferation of techniques for its control were really the norm and not profit, there would be no unemployment or "homelessness," for example. If it was, after all, due to the fear of roaming "masterless men," produced by the privatization of the commons in Europe in the eighteenth century, as what Foucault attributes the rise of the "carceral society" in *Discipline and Punish*, then what explains the existence of the unemployed and the poor today? To say unemployment depends on a political calculation made on the basis of an arbitrary cultural definition of health and well-being that serves a few while precluding extending its privileges to others who are singled out for poverty does not explain the existence of poverty but simply redescribes the common sense about it in a more sophisticated language. It assumes that poverty is cultural and has to do with how well or ill someone conforms to societal norms, like how "smart" they are or whether they have made "good" choices or not, and not their access to the means of production, whether they own them and can use them to exploit the labor of others or are exploited. It is actually access to and control over the means of production that empowers a few to establish social norms and enforce conformity to them as well as explains the content of those norms and what lies outside them, rather than the struggle over such norms in and of themselves and what they (dis)allow. Foucault's understanding of power depends on seeing it as "horizontal" and proscriptive rather than "vertical" or hierarchical, but such a view presupposes a basic equality in material terms. Foucault assumes, for example, that "the accumulation of men and the accumulation of capital cannot be separated... each makes the other possible and necessary" (*History of Sexuality* 221). Such a formal understanding of the relation of the social to the means of production denies any causal

relation of determination between them while silently assuming that production serves “to increase the docility and utility of all the elements of the system” (218). In other words, production is assumed to be a “political technology” (205) for constructing the “utopia of the perfectly governed” (198) rather than a material means to realize profit from labor.

The self-enclosed mechanical circularity of production in Foucault’s account, as in Friedman’s, simply alienates production from its class basis and thereby uncritically reflects the way production is actually alienated in practice as private property. To say this another way, Foucault does not implicate the structure of ownership in the exploitation of labor and cannot therefore examine the way the division of labor (class) shapes culture and consciousness. The result of such a view is to shift contestation from the base to the superstructure so that it is power, reified from its material basis, rather than structural inequality, that is contested. Thus, what is basic to capitalism according to Foucault is not exploitation but “these tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms [of] micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical that we call the disciplines” (*History of Sexuality* 222), and it is on such local terms that power is exercised: “power is everywhere” (93) and “where there is power, there is resistance” (95). By segregating power from its social basis in the exploitation of wage-labor, which is where the division between the powerful and powerless is materially determined, and shifting it to the level of its effects in the local and everyday micro-practices, Foucault accommodates capital in the base and as a consequence cannot explain the self-negation of capitalism produced by its own law of value, the underlying logic that leads to the polarization of classes and revolution. Thus, his theory is itself part of the dream of a perfectly governed utopia, albeit with the spectacle of resistance but, just the same, with no social revolutions. Despite the formal inversion to be found in Foucault’s writings of the technologist position that Friedman represents, the rule of the market is yet assumed to be the limit of history and all struggles are seen as merely symbolic struggles that do not touch on the basic class relations. For both of them, culture is segregated from the economic base, and in this way they eternalize capitalism through a culturalist argument and place cultural theory in the service of the ruling class.

The culturalist account of the rise of culturalism is not an explanation of why contemporary culture is ruled by the logic of capital and so obsessed with the “inside” practices of everyday life that the “outside” is made to disappear. In fact they make an explanation from the outside impossible by consigning its terms to the past on the grounds

that the present is basically different because of new technologies and exceeds any logic except the a-logic of desire, which is of course the voluntarist logic of the market.

The disguising of class conflicts in terms of culture is as old as class society itself. Every ruling class in history has identified its particular form of rule with the general good and justified its mode of appropriating the labor of others in cultural, and for the most part religious, terms. It was with the rise of capitalism, however, that culture begins to take on an independent basis and is seen as, by definition, “free,” as in Humanist and Enlightenment discourses; free from religious and political coercion, on the one hand, and free of the rule of the market, on the other. Because the freedom of culture was always only an ideal of bourgeois society contradicted in daily practice, it became a dogma that culture was a timeless space that expresses what is most rational, moral and beautiful—“the best that has been thought and said,” in Matthew Arnold’s words—and as such the essence of what it means to be a person. The reason for this idealization of culture has an economic basis, however, in the basic inequality of capitalism, and it is necessary to unpack this relation in order to explain the present dominance of culturalism and why it has replaced humanism as an apologetic for inequality.

In the period between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, capitalism systematically dispossessed the laborer of not only her labor power or ability to work but also all the material preconditions through which labor is exclusively possible, such as the material to be worked upon (e.g., the enclosure of the commons), the instruments of labor (e.g., the expropriation of India’s textile technology by the British), and the means of subsistence of the laborer (e.g., the commodification of agricultural products). This systematic expropriation of the material conditions of productive social life commodified the worker as an “individual” unit of the production process whose only value is as an instrument of production to make profit for the owners. It is this individual, free to work or starve, that is the real material basis for bourgeois philosophy and culture since the Enlightenment and what is behind the basic division in the human sciences between the subject (culture) and its “soft” knowledges, such as the humanities and social sciences, and the object (nature), which is investigated by the “hard” physical sciences. Capitalism needs persons to be defined as individuals because it needs them to voluntarily enter into a contractual economic agreement to exchange their labor power for wages in order to disguise their material exploitation as a class. An idealist view of culture is the necessary result of a society that defines its highest

achievements in terms of individual freedom, because it depends on the free exchange of labor for wages, and is thereby forced to attack any other cultural basis for defining freedom, such as social equality. Because the development of capitalism itself increasingly limited individual freedom to those who can monetarily afford it, the “individual” has been displaced as the standard of knowing and achievement, especially since the historic economic downturn experienced by the Western democracies since the mid-’70s. It was then that culturalism was institutionally consolidated and became culturally dominant.

Culturalism is not simply the use of culture to disguise and legitimate class oppression, as idealism and religion have always done. Neither is it simply an extension of the humanist ideology of culture as the free expression of free subjects, which relegates causes of inequality to nature and explains it away as differences of knowledge or natural abilities. Culturalism is the systematic inculcation in the regime of discourse which gives all social practices a cultural foundation in codes, conventions, discourse, values, perceptions, and affect—rather than explain social practices as, at root, economic and grounded in the division of labor and the interaction of labor and the natural world—at a time when it becomes impossible to justify capitalism on its own terms because of the crisis of profitability and the increasing inequality it produces. Culturalism, in short, is a regime of class struggle undertaken to relegitimize what has already been delegitimized. The changes in technology that are commonly used to explain the autonomy of culture in contemporary cultural theory are actually themselves explained as effects of class forces, especially the drive to innovate, which is endemic to market competition and which has as a necessary result the increasing alienation of the worker from her own labor power so as to augment wealth and reproduce her subjection to capital. The shift from “modernism” as a cultural dominant to “postmodernism,” which in the humanities is represented as a shift from “humanism” to “culturalism,” is a cultural effect of the global legitimization crisis of cyber-capitalism and not its triumphant “globalization,” as culturalist discourses argue. This crisis is because capitalism cannot ultimately survive the reification of culture it makes necessary, as this reification itself is caused by the separation of the worker from the productive process, which is what is behind the crisis of overproduction and the fall in the rate of profit that has so spectacularly erupted into view in the global crash of 2008. Culture has become so important because it is a way to distinguish productive from unproductive workers (instruments of labor) in the context of the overproduction of capital.

For roughly the last forty years the capitalist West has experienced a prolonged crisis of profitability that comes from systemic overproduction—it has reached the point that technological efficiency has massively lowered the need for labor worldwide, thus raising unemployment (often disguised as underemployment) while the profit imperative is brutally maintained as the rationale of production. Capitalism now is finding it difficult to secure new areas of labor for productive investment, which among other things (such as financial speculation) forces it to expand its market geographically and at great cost in both material and ideological terms. The global expansion of capitalism and the recurrent speculative bubbles (Savings and Loan, dot com, Enron, and now the housing bubble) are actually short-term ways to stave off the inevitable fall in the rate of profit that comes from the introduction of technological innovations in the context of market competition by the destruction of social resources. The value of capital depends on its ability to productively employ wage-labor and realize a surplus value over and above the costs of production and the reproduction of the laborer. In order to realize a bigger share of surplus value in the context of market competition, capitalists are forced to lower the amount of necessary labor it takes to produce commodities, and this is for the most part done by increasing the productivity of labor through the introduction of labor-saving devices. With the spread of the most efficient methods of production the general result is to raise the amount of capital socially invested in what Marx calls “constant capital” (fixed plant and equipment), relative to the amount invested in “variable capital” (labor), thus increasing “the organic composition of capital” at the expense of the working class who find themselves de-skilled, their wages cheapened, and unemployed (*Capital* Vol. I, ch. 25). The rising organic composition of capital is what produces a fall in the profit rate and leads to the crisis of legitimacy of capitalism because of the social costs inflicted on the workforce.<sup>2</sup> Capitalism, through the workings of the law of value that governs the production of commodities, thus inevitably reaches the point where it calls itself into question as it is “incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him” (Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”). Because capitalism over the last forty years has not been able to “deliver the goods” to more and more people and prove the superiority of the market for insuring individual freedom, the “free subject” of the classical period of bourgeois ascendancy has been placed in crisis and a self-enclosed understanding of culture has taken its

place in the dominant ideology as the self-regulating mechanism that protects the market from a class-based critique that would implicate “ideas” in the terms of inequality. Culture serves this crisis management function most effectively by not simply dismissing inequality and the antagonisms it generates (how could it?), but by translating (reifying) the contradictions into cultural terms that leave the foundation of capitalism basically intact. At the core of the labor theory of culture is the explanation of how culturalism itself has an economic basis—it reflects the interests of those who, having had their material needs already met from the labor of the other, can afford to focus on their desires in the market at a time of inescapable social inequality, and it projects this special interest as universal, as ideology has always done.

By drawing out the ways in which cultural theory is shaped by the developments of labor, a labor theory of culture works to connect the most pressing cultural questions to the economic and political structures that determine how people live their lives. The connection of culture and daily life is based on the recognition that culture has an economic root in labor: the “process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I 283). Before there can be a culture of consent and resistance over the socially consequential meaning(s) that shape people’s lives, there first needs to be their material life itself. By grasping the material dependence of culture on the metabolism between labor and nature, it follows, as Marx goes on to explain, “that the man who possesses no other property than his labour power, must, in all conditions of society and culture, be the slave of other men who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labour” (“Gotha Programme” 81). In other words, according to Marx, labor is not simply a natural process necessary to sustain life but is also a historical zone of conflicts over the control of production. The economic root of culture is evident in the view of culture as difference. Difference theory maintains that freedom comes with a plurality of voices in which none dominates over others and in this way supports the bourgeois interest to conflate freedom with equal opportunity in the market rather than equate freedom with freedom from need, which entails the “logocentric” act of ending the exploitation of labor by capital. It follows from the awareness of the reliance of culture on labor that culture is neither merely an expression of technological capacity nor a symbolic compensation for material contradictions, as Jameson, for example, argues (*Political Unconscious* 79), but rather is the arena “in which men become conscious of this



[economic] conflict and fight it out” (Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 21). In short, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (21).

Marx’s labor theory has for the most part been dismissed in cultural theory as “humanist” because, for him, labor names “the human essence” (“Theses on Feuerbach” 145) that explains culture. But such a reading misses the fact that for Marx the human essence (labor) is neither a metaphysical “abstraction inherent in each single individual” (145), such as the “rationality” of *homo economicus* in classical political economy or rational choice theory, nor is it an idealist representation of “‘society as the subject’” (*The German Ideology* 59), which regards the “interrelated individuals . . . as a single individual, which accomplishes the mystery of generating itself” (59). Rather, labor refers to “the ensemble of the social relations” (“Theses on Feuerbach” 145) under which men and women interact with the material world and each other and is therefore a materialist rather than a metaphysical concept. The boundaries of culture are, on this logic, defined not by cultural struggles themselves but by the possibilities of labor as the material basis of culture (what people need in order to produce and consume), and the meanings attached to these practices (as essential and consequential or not) are dependent on the collective social project of production (the global division of labor and the conflicts over it). Although debates over cultural “values” tend to begin where it seems that labor ends—in the sphere of consumption—the options of what can and cannot be consumed in any culture are determined by the kind and level of activity in production at any given historical moment. It is this necessary material “context” that determines the “meanings” available in a society’s signifying practices.

Currently, for instance, there is what is widely commented on as a “return to ideology,” and the world is seen as divided between rival “fundamentalisms.” Leaving aside that fundamentalism in the Islamic world is not just about values (although that is the way it is represented in the Western media, it is essentially about inequality), in the United States it is seen in purely cultural terms as a rise in religious feelings in response to an invasion of “alien” cultural values represented under the sign of 9/11 (Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*). What the narrative of a cultural war over “values” silently covers over is the accumulation of surplus profits in the countries of the North from the countries of the South. When “they” say that the West is on a crusade to destroy Islam, this is a code for “the West is plundering our oil, forcing our governments to spend our

money on military weapons, giving us cell phones and DVDs instead of drinking water..." Fundamentalism is basically an economic struggle transcoded into populist religious languages for organizational reasons (in mosques, by governments, in the media, etc.). U.S. fundamentalism is also represented domestically as the dominance of a "red state" mentality over its "blue" rival, purportedly testifying to basic differences in cultural consumption (as in the writings of such mainstream commentators as David Brooks and Thomas Frank): latte drinking, Volvo driving, and IKEA shopping versus soft drinks, NASCAR, and Wal-Mart, for example. On the latter terms, U.S. fundamentalism is supposed to signal the dominance of an oil dependent mode of production located in the "red states" over a service economy mostly located in the "blue states." Whether seen as a clash of civilizations between the West and the rest or a cultural war within the United States, what is being disguised under "cultural wars" is the material (that is, economic) domination that explains both the cultural differences within the United States, whether one shops at Wal-Mart or IKEA or drinks latte or a Big Gulp, for example, as well as the culturalist ideology that claims that cultural difference explains material inequality in the world rather than the reverse. Without the accumulation and concentration of capital in the North at the expense of the South there would neither be the array of commodities available in the United States nor would there be the culture industry promoting culturalism as the global frame of intelligibility explaining the contemporary.

The declining rate of profit produced by the growing concentration and centralization of capital, which can be seen in the wave of corporate merges and layoffs in recent years, necessitates ever more cheapening of the costs of production through such things as technical innovations and the global search for, and more and more forcible seizure of, markets of cheap labor to increase the amount of surplus value over wages (and related marginal costs) per unit output. The constant innovations produce cultural differences within and between markets as every capitalist tries to realize more surplus value by introducing competitive differences in how products are made that increases their value in relation to those of their rivals. Big Gulp versus latte drinking is not simply a difference in lifestyle choices. Both deliver caffeine and sugar to keep workers awake and alert on the job but they differ in the manner they do it, and these differences reflect divisions within labor practices, between "hi" and "lo-tech" workers, for example. While both contain high doses of caffeine, the sugar content of a latte is more variable, reflecting the "participatory

management process” of more highly skilled urban workers compared to the mass of unskilled workers who shop at places like 7-Eleven and Wal-Mart. In general, the more choices any given commodity entails for its consumption the more it reflects the needs of a self-regulating workforce whose job description dictates more thought because it has not yet been technically rationalized.

To argue that culture is economically determined by the division of labor is not to deny cultural differences and the micro-practices of the everyday but to explain them as the effects of more primary economic causes. I am doing so because contemporary cultural theory is dominated by a culturalist ideology that focuses solely on culture and not its material cause in labor arrangements, and thus it makes it seem as if the world we see is culturally determined, that it is “spirit” that moves the world. Culturalism reifies culture and blocks the consciousness of necessity that is needed for social emancipation. In actuality the effects of culture on subjectivity and social practices such as voting and shopping are relays of economic production, and these reflect as imperatives and drives what are at root economic interests tied to the division of labor. Red state versus blue state cultural practices and consumption patterns reflect different segments of capital in the United States and the degree to which they are competitive in world markets, whether they are struggling, like the oil industry, over global hegemony, or whether they enjoy a monopolistic dominance, like the information technology sector, and profit from cooperation with rivals (e.g., open source) and increase their profits incrementally through constant (planned as obsolescent) innovations. Big Gulp or NASCAR racing do not signify as they do because the workers who consume them work for big oil or because they have been brainwashed by Republican talk radio. The efficient “jolt” offered by a Big Gulp and the “rush” enjoyed in NASCAR in the presence of loud and fast machines is an effect of the division of labor and the kinds of needs and skills required by capitalism both to normalize these workers to the type of low-skill work that they do and to make them more productive by suppressing the need for class conscious cultural practices and displacing them with training in competitive “brand wars” (disguised as “culture wars”). To be blind to the economic needs reflected in culture by considering culture to be merely the self-enclosed production of signs and the contestations over meaning is, therefore, to engage in the production of “false consciousness” (Engels, “Letters” 766) and to “imagine...false or seeming motive forces” (766) in place of “the real motive forces” (766) that compel individuals. The real force determining culture—which is mainly

reduced under capitalism to the culture of consumption and “mere training to act as a machine” (Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” 497)—is profit, and the precondition of profit is exploited and alienated labor.

According to the labor theory of culture,

It was through labor that humanity created itself as a skillful, large-brained, language-using animal, and through labor that it created an elaborate cultural superstructure. The very impressiveness of mankind’s mental achievements, however, has obscured the fundamental significance of labor. Furthermore, the separation of planning for labor from the labor itself, a development of complex society, contributed to the rise of an idealistic world outlook, one that explains people’s actions as “arising out of thoughts instead of their needs” [Engels]. (Eleanor. B. Leacock, quoted in Woolfson 77)

By considering the historical alienation of social labor into culture as a realm of ideas that obscures its own socioeconomic basis, Engels transforms our understanding of labor from being simply a natural-technical activity into a crucial critique-al concept opposed to ideology. Culture is a “reflection” of the economic base because it “explains people’s actions as arising out of thoughts instead of their needs,” as it must, out of necessity, given the complexity of the division of labor that demands flexible signifying practices and literacies while at the same time demanding technical control of the relationship of society to nature. As a concrete historical activity, labor, of course, transforms the material world in accordance with subjective human needs and abilities and, in the process, expands them. Labor is a constant social activity expended on nature that through the course of history requires the abilities of the laborer be adjusted to the conditions in which labor is carried out. The consciousness of the laborer is thus also the product of accumulated (or “dead,” as Marx says) social labor. However, it is the prioritization of this abstract (natural and social) compulsion shaping the concrete instance of labor and its consequences that allows Engels to define labor as the opposite of ideology, as the real social activity and material precondition that explains human practices. As the other of ideology, labor is thus what Marx in his “Theses on Feuerbach” calls a “‘revolutionary’ . . . practical-critical, activity” (*Reader* 143), and ideology is understood in a material way as the spontaneous reflection of the complexity of labor arrangements that mystifies the real causes of human activity, rather than simply a cultural bias, for example. As a “revolutionary practical-critical activity,” or “praxis,” labor acts as a material force that transforms the

natural world to serve human purposes and in the process—through, for example, the development of abstract signs and languages that allow them to generalize from the specific occasion and to foresee the future—transforms human beings themselves from being slaves to nature into a conscious and collective agent. Theory, thus, has a necessary function in the labor process in that it makes it possible to abstract from the immediately given reality and to project into the future a different reality that corresponds more with evolving human needs in a way that culture as a spontaneous reflection of the existing order does not. In this sense, theory must be understood as grasping the outside of culture, and unlike culture in general, theory cannot be reduced to ideology, which is the uncritical reflection of the social relations that arises spontaneously from the existing division of labor.

Taken as something “in itself” separate from the labor practices, as a realm of ideas or “culture,” an ideological distortion takes place that mystifies rather than clarifies the place of culture in the social. This separation and distortion is itself necessitated by history (past labor), because capitalism demands that more and more areas of life be technically rationalized in order to increase the rate of profit, as “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society” (Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” 476). This “rationalization” demanded by production for exchange ultimately “strip[s] of its halo every occupation” (476) and compels man “to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” (476). Whereas up till now particular cultural activities were alienated from their social basis by the market and given their own distinct disciplinary formations, such as “art,” “philosophy,” or “ethics,” the same process of rationalization for the market has now made culture as a whole seem like a thing in itself (a realm of values) unconnected to the social base of production, because it has become the object of specialized producers. Culture has always had an economic function, however, in co-coordinating labor in relation to its material task and in reconciling the energies of individuals to work in common, as can more clearly be seen in tribal agricultural societies. The form of culture, of course, changes depending on the nature of the class relations it reflects. Prior to its commodification, culture used to be a reflection of a more spontaneous and organic division of labor that arose from the more direct and forcible class system of feudalism in which land served as the primary resource and culture was embedded within

a religious framework, which provided a highly codified symbolic interpretation of the world and one's place in it. With the advent of capitalism and the privatization of the communal lands that formed the basis of agricultural economy, the "organic" symbolic edifice of culture was destroyed and it could no longer be seen in its traditional guise as a self-evident expression of the divine order, and culture then began to take on a highly rational purpose to provide an independent justification for all human activities without appealing to religion or tradition. Culture, in short, is always the production of men and women within a particular historic relation to the means of production through which they (re)produce their existence. It is only under transnational capitalism and its culture industry that culture appears totally alienated from the social relations of production as a realm of purely discursive "values," because the rule of capital systematically alienates labor from the laborer by forcing her to produce not according to her needs but solely for exchange on the market. It thus alienates the laborer from herself, and after robbing her of the time to cultivate herself it sells her identity back to her in the form of consumer culture.

Culture, which is the production of subjectivity, becomes a commodity with the commodification of the laborer. To put it another way, language, which is "practical consciousness" (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*), becomes ideology (false consciousness) when it ceases to be the self-expression of the needs of the people and becomes a specialized activity of cultural workers undertaken for exchange on the market. Even the definition of "ideology" in cultural theory reflects the law of value that drives the process of commodification: ideology used to mean "false consciousness" of class inequality when its meaning was embedded in the languages of the worldwide socialist movement; but now that it has become a textware of academic specialists and corporate media, it functions merely as a descriptive term for the "values" associated with a given group of people (as in the "clash of civilizations" and "culture wars"). For another example, just look at how the meaning of the Helvetica typeface has changed from when it was initially developed in socialist Switzerland to its incorporation in capitalist culture: it used to signify "accessibility" and "transparency," democratic values, but it has since, through its association with big business and bourgeois government, come to signify the opposite, with merely the appearance of openness to cloak absolute corporate power (*Helvetica*, dir. Gary Hustwit, 2007).

Capitalism, by depriving the worker of access to the means of production, forces the worker to work for wages the value of which is

equivalent to the number of commodities she needs in order to survive, return to work, and to produce the next generation of workers. The amount of time required for this “necessary labor,” given the technical productivity of labor, is minimal. The rest of the time the worker is engaged in “surplus labor”—labor that forms neither part of wages nor the consumption of the capitalist but is solely to create values that later can be exchanged on the market providing profit to the capitalist. The alienated labor is the basis of culture, because it creates a world of commodities as well as the alienated perception of production in which it appears that labor is exchanged for wages (articles of consumption), rather than that labor is the source of all value. If production for need was the rule rather than production for profit, there would be no “culture” in the one-sided way it is currently understood as a reified realm of consumption (which is coded in culturalist theory as discursive “production”). Culturalism, which posits that values shape the world we see, is the ideology of the class whose existence depends on the exploitation of wage-labor, which in actuality produces the commodification in which culture takes on an alienated appearance as a separate and self-enclosed area free of economic determination. And yet, labor in reality creates the “all-sided production of the whole earth” (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 59), both objectively in the transformation of nature and subjectively in the transformation of the laborer whose exploited labor can in no way be *experienced* as a creative and self-fulfilling act (i.e., as agency) because of its abstract economic basis. Because labor is the “*all-round* dependence” (59) of this “*world-historical* co-operation of individuals” (59), as Marx and Engels argue, it also necessarily produces the basis for “the control and conscious mastery of these powers, which born of the action of men on one another, have till now overawed and ruled men as powers completely alien to them” (59) and thereby provides the basis for the materialist critique of ideology and the empowerment of the worker as a criti(que)al citizen of the world. Labor is thus more than the source of value, it is a “‘revolutionary’ practical-critical, activity” that transforms our understanding of culture from an ideological one that trivializes culture as a “thing-in-itself” to a criti(que)al one that implicates culture in the material world and thereby helps to emancipate consciousness from the rule of capital. In what follows, I investigate the construction of popular culture in general and melodrama in particular and lay bare how “popular culture” is made to support the ideology of culturalism in the knowledge industry. In doing so I will explain what is living (productive) and what is dead (reproductive) in popular culture and why.

## CLASS IMAG(IN)ED: POPULISM AND GLOBAL MELODRAMA

"Popular culture" has become the almost exclusive focus of cultural theory in the knowledge industry of the metropole and, in this sense, popular culture can be understood as "central to the project of cultural studies" (Storey, *Popular Culture* xi). Popular culture is analytically opposed to dominant culture in cultural theory, and far from being a trivial matter it is read as instrumental for consolidating support for the status quo. The trivializing of popular culture as mere "leisure" or "entertainment" makes it a particularly effective place for securing the consent of the governed. The study of popular culture is therefore political. "Popular culture," seen as the place "where hegemony arises, and where it is secured" (Hall, "Deconstructing" 239), is used in cultural studies to contest idealist understandings of culture that position mass consumer culture in a lower scale of value in relation to "high" culture. The traditional distinction between "high" and "low" culture presumes culture to have a civilizing mission to "humanize" the other, and yet it ignores, and thereby stabilizes, social inequality. The politics of popular culture is oftentimes a matter of looking at how culture is "made from within and below" by "subordinated peoples" (Fiske 2) in opposition to the dominant interests and agencies that control material production. The study of popular culture in cultural studies is mostly and primarily concerned with discourse, or, in other words, "the articulation and activation of meaning" (Storey xiii) in a culture that is used to secure and contest power at the site of subjectivity.

Popular culture has become the object of contestation because of its own hegemonic function in cultural studies. For example, Lawrence Grossberg, editor of the influential journal *Cultural Studies*, writes that the argument for "why popular culture matters," given by Stuart Hall in his founding essay quoted above, "continues to leave the relationship between culture and capital unexamined" ("Speculations" 16). In contrast to his own years of denying any causal relationship between capitalism and culture (e.g., *Bringing it all Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies*), Grossberg now argues that "cultural studies must explicitly return to questions of economics" and "the exploitation of...labor" if it is going to be able to understand, respond to, and transform "the changing configurations of...systems of inequality" (16). Similarly, Douglas Kellner argues that the "turn [...] away from so-called high or elite culture in favor of the popular...merely inverts the positive/negative valorizations of the older high/low



distinction” and, as a result, “disconnects cultural studies from attempts to develop oppositional forms of culture” that “wanted to develop art that would revolutionize society” (142–3). The study of popular culture, considered as in itself subversive of dominant culture, is here seen as a populist and antidemocratic assumption.

The study of “popular culture” today thus raises the question: is popular culture a relay of the dominant ideology that legitimates the way things are, or does it carry an oppositional value as critique for a new society? Is popular best understood as the spontaneous expression of oppression and resistance “made from within and below” by “subordinated peoples,” or as revolutionary because it corresponds to the material needs of the oppressed and exploited to be socially emancipated, as for example in Georg Lukács’ understanding of “imputed class consciousness” (*History and Class Consciousness*)? Or is the focus on culture meeting people’s needs itself an example of reified thinking because such a focus marginalizes the liberating power of pleasure, the “Everything Bad is Good for You” (Steven Johnson) argument that sees in popular culture, such as the Internet, an insurgent savvy awareness? Below I discuss melodrama as a way to make theorization of the popular and popular culture more concrete and answer the questions it poses for cultural studies.

Melodrama is normally understood in the code of affect and desire, as the genre is usually concerned with the conflict between the private emotional lives of the characters and their public roles. Melodrama, however, has always been a site of the “class struggle at the level of theory” (Althusser, *Essays*) where the populist sentimentality of cultural resistance and critique-al knowledge of the social have fought it out. Marx and Engels’ contrasting of Eugène Sue’s *Mystères de Paris* and Balzac’s novels are an example. In my reading of melodrama I will outline how the historical shifts in the discussion of melodrama reveal the political economy of the “subject” and agency under capitalism and thus explain that what appears to be a debate over the politics of the popular in cultural studies is in actuality an interclass debate about which subjectivities better alibi the ruling class and facilitate the construction of a compliant workforce. Later, I will demonstrate the effectiveness of this theorization through a reading of the film version of Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy* (dir. Neil Jordan, 1997).

The question of the “popular” is central to ongoing debates in cultural studies. Although this is partly due to the serious consequences its theorization has for social praxis in shaping the emergent globality in the wake of the antiglobalization movement and the mass protests

around the world over the U.S. invasion of Iraq for instance, more importantly it is because in capitalism “popular” is used to hide *class* antagonism (through such descriptive concepts as “status” and “lifestyle,” for example). Before I theorize the conflicts over the popular in contemporary discourses I offer a brief history of the term here.

“Popular” comes from the Latin *popularis* (belonging to the people) and was “originally a legal and political” (Williams, *Keywords*) term in the sense that it denoted the properties, resources, and rights set aside for “citizens” by the State. The contemporary meaning of the term as “widely favored” or “well-liked” also stems from the original Latin meaning in the sense that it presupposes a similar division between what is “private” (and protected from the majority by the armed coercive power of the State) and what is “public” (and maintained by the “consensus” of the governed). The coercive division between the public and the private in classical Roman society produced the need for “tribunes of the people” who sought popular election to office by defending the public interest and forming “popular opinion.” For this reason as well, “popular” may denote an opportunist trivialization of important issues for the sake of personal gain, as in “popularizing.” With the industrial revolution and the emergence of mass culture the term for the most part loses the connotations of status, which it always had up to this point, and takes on the meaning of that which comes from “the people themselves,” as if it simply denoted a homogeneous and spontaneous activity on their part with no political content. In the German idealist tradition, popular as “of the people” becomes a central concept for talking about culture as “made by the people themselves” (i.e., “folk-culture”), sometimes within a utopian framework that was opposed to industrial “civilization.” It was the evacuation of the concept’s traditional critical function as a political term by romantic anticapitalist thought that caused the term to undergo another change in meaning, which in some ways reactivates the older usage as that which marks a division between what belongs to “the people” (public) and what does not (private). This is the usage found in the socialist and communist tradition: “popular” as that which serves the interests of the majority, the propertyless masses who have been expropriated by capital from control and ownership of the social wealth they have produced. Thus, what is “popular” for Marx denotes “a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society” but “the dissolution of all classes” (Marx, *Early Writings* 256)—the proletariat.<sup>3</sup> The proletariat embodies the popular for Marx because its condition of life is the norm under capitalism, as well as because of how in accordance with this position

the proletariat “cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from—and thereby emancipating—all other spheres of society” (256). Popular is thus a term that designates both the material position and the historical task of the proletariat as it has been formed by capitalist production and is no longer a merely cultural marker of “status” (whether “high” as in the classical Roman idea of the citizen or “low” as in romantic ideology) or simply political. With the emergence of the revolutionary usage of the popular as of the proletariat, a “populist” backlash occurs and the term acquires its contemporary apologetic character as denoting a “cross-class” or “post-class” mode of intelligibility in which the class antagonisms in culture are suppressed for the purposes of mere local reforms, as in the writings of Stephen Greenblatt, for instance, who elaborates on Bakhtin’s writings on carnival. Thus, according to Greenblatt, theatre constitutes a “felt community” that circulates a “social energy” that represents an image of society “in which convictions and class do not divide people, for social energy cuts across differences and ‘trickles down’ from the high and mighty to the low and abject, including all to explode together in laughter, anxiety, and exhalation” (Siebers 61). It is no surprise that the meaning of the popular today is so controversial, as it is the site of a class battle in which it either denotes the idea of the negation of capitalism or coming to peace with global inequality.

What is popular, I will argue, is not a question of “subjectivity” (freedom of speech) but of objectivity (economic freedom): the popular is not a matter of desire and pleasure but of material need and historic necessity. It is not “popular” but an ideological operation, in other words, to occult consciousness of the class antagonism at the base of society between capital and wage-labor. Popular in this ideological sense is in actuality an elitist bourgeois practice that maintains exploitation regardless of which group or identity articulates it. And yet this is precisely the sense of popular used by the dominant cultural studies, which argues that popular culture is radical because it is “made from within and below” by “subordinated peoples” (Fiske, *The Popular* 2) and as such “resistant” to the dominant. What is “radical” now is precisely a populist post-class understanding of the popular that alibis class inequality by reducing questions of inequality to the signifying dynamics of consumption where power can seem to be aleatory and shifting. Because of the contemporary equation of radical with the surface features of culture, it is necessary to reactivate radical as “root” knowledge of the social (Marx, *Reader* 60)—knowledge of the social relations of production (class). Root knowledge is essential in order to foreground the binary in the “popular” between

popular-as-populist post-class ideology, which normalizes inequality through the symbolic practices of cultural resistance, and popular-as-class critique, which desediments the culture and reveals the material forces of change. The blending and blurring of the binary supports the ruling class by dehistoricizing and normalizing capitalist subjectivities and displacing the historical “outside” (socialism) with a pietistic “beyond” (utopia). In such terms, the outside (labor) is thought to be an effect of the inside (tropes), as Jacques Derrida, for example, argues in his critique of structuralism: the binary inside/outside that governs materialist theory of culture is itself an effect of *différance*, the internal tropic play of the structure itself as it tries to “fix” its absent center (“Structure, Sign, and Play” 247–65).<sup>4</sup> In these terms, it is assumed that “once the deconstruction of those categories [of identity] fully reveals the power games that govern their actual structuration, new and more complex hegemonico-political moves become possible within them” (Laclau, *Making* 2), or, in other words, “when the normal run of things is traumatically interrupted the field is opened up for discursive ideological competition” (Žižek, *Tragedy* 17). According to this discursive logic, it becomes impossible to connect the secondary processes and mediations of culture to their more basic economic causes, as any such connection is itself ideological. And yet, such a connection is necessary for changing the social totality from a “realm of necessity” to a “realm of freedom” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. III, 958–9). By disconnecting the outside (social relations of production) from the inside (cultural practices of meaning), the relation of determination between the two is reversed and culture is assumed to constitute the real and to remake history.

The dominant cultural studies reads “the popular” as “post-class”—an opaque network of discursive strategies and flexi-subjects free of the material universality of labor. This is the popular as a relay of the dogma that “discourse” is “co-extensive with the social as such” (Laclau, “Populist” 87), which displaces class consciousness of the social totality outside of discourse with an entrepreneurial “desire” for “equality” in consumption (Laclau and Mouffe 164). In cultural studies now the rule is that “‘Society’ is not a valid object of discourse” because “there is no single underlying principle . . . constituting” it (Laclau and Mouffe 111) such as “surplus value.” Surplus value is the unit of laboring productivity privately consumed by the owning class that is daily expended by the working class over and above that portion of the workday whose use value is equivalent to the worker’s historically attained means of subsistence. Without the concept of surplus value there cannot be root critique of culture as ideology that

maintains class inequality in the base. In other words, the classical Marxist critique of the global regime of wage-labor and its knowledge industries cannot guide collective praxis for the emancipation of all from the rule of profit when “truth is plural,” as Derrida says (*Spurs* 103). “Truth is plural” is another way of saying that all knowledge is local and thus not reliable for securing a universal social good. The coercive equality of the market needs the popular as commonsense liberal pluralism that maintains the system of wage-labor, not popular as knowledge of the commonality of labor that is necessary to change it. It is the same common sense that dismisses critique as domineering, as when the unity of “a ‘universal class’” and “a ‘knowing’ vanguard subject” is read as the mark of “totalitarianism” (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 3). But, without such class conscious unity in the commonality of labor, cultural theory dissolves itself into an empty populism that supports the wage-slavery of the global market as “resistance.” The populist cultural studies that celebrate people’s symbolic resistance in the pleasures of consumption cannot explain why there can be no equality in consumption while a few continue to live off the unpaid surplus labor of the many.

I am arguing that the “popular” is not the rule of desire and ignorance enshrined in the cultural studies that takes the limits of the market as the limits of history, rather, I treat the “popular” as the arena of concepts of, and conflicts over, the cultural “real” (Zavarzadeh, *Seeing Films Politically* 5). The cultural real is neither the space of the actual (the market), which is merely the surface appearance of society, nor the ideological reflection of the existing regime in people’s minds (ideology). The cultural real is where the contradictions between the ideological and the actual, which are caused by the material forces behind appearances that concretely shape the actual and thus perpetually bring the ideological to crisis, surface and must be contained. Popular in the sense that I mean as the structure of conflicts shaping the social real, reconnects theory with the daily by implicating everyday practices into the ensemble of practices that makes the totality under capitalism (what Marx calls the “working day,” *Capital* Vol. I, ch. 6). In other words, popular marks the place where “what is” has come to be, and that furthermore explains why “what is” must change. Change is theorized as a matter of necessity, particularly the need for men and women to (re)produce as a totality their material conditions of life. From this it follows that what is popular is not merely a rhetorical question about how culture “figures” the real and “persuades” by appealing to “desire.” Persuasion, as Marx explains, is always a matter of “the silent compulsion of the economic” (*Capital*

Vol. 1, 899). On the contrary, as Brecht explains, “popular” is a question of “the representation of truth, of the real mechanism of society” (83) that enables people to “make history, change the world and themselves” (“Popularity and Realism” 81). As Marx puts it, men and women “make history” when they become “conscious of the conflicts” (which are “not chosen by themselves” but a matter of what they are “compelled to do”), “take sides,” and “fight it out” (*Contribution* 21).

The populist argument in cultural studies says that Marxist theory is not revolutionary but conservative because its commitment to class analysis prevents it from understanding the “excess” pleasure generated by capitalism beyond exploitation, which it locates in such popular cultural forms as melodrama. The passionate attachments people form in consuming commodity culture on this reading are seen as open to being re-signified into postcapitalist commitments. In Slavoj Žižek’s writings, for example, capitalism is not based on exploitation in production (surplus labor) but on struggles over consumption (“surplus enjoyment”). Revolutionary practice is always informed by class consciousness, and transformative cultural critique has always aimed at producing class consciousness by laying bare the false consciousness that ruling ideology institutes in the everyday. Transformative cultural critique, in other words, is always a linking of consciousness to production practices from which a knowledge of social totality emerges. Žižek considers classical Marxism to have an epistemologically naïve theory of “ideology” that fails to account for the persistence of “desire” beyond critique, the “enlightened false-consciousness” of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, *Mapping Ideology*, and so on. Žižek’s more recent “return to the centrality of the Marxist critique” (Preface, *Reader* ix) is, as a result, a purely tropic voluntarism of the kind he endlessly celebrates in his diffusionist readings of culture as desire-al moments when social norms are violated and personal emotions spontaneously experienced as absolutely compulsory (as “drive”). Žižek’s concept of revolutionary Marxist praxis thus consists of re-describing it as an “excessive” lifestyle choice—analogue to pedophilia and other culturally marginalized practices (*Ticklish Subject* 381–8). In his reading, Marxism is the only metaphorical displacement of “desire” into “surplus pleasure” that makes imperative the “direct socialization of the productive process” (350) and that thus causes the subjects committed to it to experience a symbolic death at the hands of the neoliberal culture industry. It is this “affirmative” reversal of familiar anticommunist narratives that makes Žižek’s writings so highly praised in the bourgeois “high-theory” market—where it is

read as “subtle” and an example of “deep thinking” because it confirms a transcendental position considered above politics by making all politics ideological. If everything is ideology, however, there can be no fundamental social change, only formal repetition and “reversal of values” (Nietzsche). Žižek’s pastiche of psycho-marxism consists in presenting what is only theoretically possible for the capitalist—those few who have already met, in excess, their material needs through the exploitation of the labor of the other and who can therefore afford to elaborate fantasies of desire—as a universal form of agency freely available to everyone (surplus enjoyment).

In the affirmative cultural studies represented by Žižek, popular culture is not a site of false consciousness of the totality as classical Marxism argues, because the subject is seen as taking from her experience of consumption what are widely considered to be knowledges at odds with the normative values of the dominant culture. Take *Erin Brockovich* (Soderbergh, 2000), for example. In a populist reading, what is of value in the film is the way in which sexist representations of women are reiterated as enabling of an activist subjectivity that radically questions the normativity of global representations. Thus, what will be necessary to focus on are such scenes that ironically stage and reiterate the sexist norm, like the bedroom scene between Erin and George, her biker boyfriend, when Erin, faced with unemployment once again, is forced to admit that her adolescent fantasy of herself as “Miss Wichita” did not mean that she was “going to do something important with her life.” The scene becomes a staged parody of her acceptance of the crown, which goes on to mock the global values she claimed that her reign would be devoted to: ending world hunger and bringing about world peace. It is the knowledge of the impossibility of such goals being brought about through such means as a “beauty contest” that justifies as more “realistic” Erin’s use of her body—what the film refers to as her “boobs”—in her work as a legal aid/activist dedicated to uncovering and prosecuting the class action case against The Pacific Gas & Electric Company.

The excess of the purely filmic experience—the moment staging the fantasy of women’s sexuality as an agent of world-historic change—is read in the affirmative cultural studies as a “structure of feeling” that gives “the very first indication [...] that... a new structure is forming” (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 133) within the symbolic edifice of a culture’s norms and regulations that radically calls into question its more traditional values. In this reading the “affective” is “read” as an effect of “power” and given its own separate genealogy that cuts it off from its relation to the economic

base, which actually determines social change. The “power” of these films to “affect” change by imaginative means is thus reduced to reiterating the reformist notion that change is a matter of the contingent and aleatory self-change of cultural practices themselves. As in Foucault, power spontaneously emerges from the excessive body and is contained and re-signified through dominant representations that themselves gradually change (proliferate) through such contacts and re-containments. But such a reading must assume that cultural practices and cultural studies are not part of the same regime of labor. In actuality, what is being called the “affective” and coded as an “excess” in *Erin Brockovich*, where the real is shown to be a fantasy open to political re-signification, is not merely a theoretical construction (culturalism). It is itself the product of a historical laboring process through which people are being trained daily by mass industrial production through an ensemble of practices (education, popular culture, the cinema, the family, personal relationships, social networking, and so on) to see culture as self-enclosed and come to assume this training as a natural basis for reading/writing/thinking/acting in the structure of global capitalism (the workday). Affect and excess, in other words, which are attributed to the consumer’s experience in the affirmative cultural studies, are alibis for dissimulating as a spontaneous experience of the subject what is in fact the role of the culture industry as a whole in training the postmodern workforce in the consciousness skills of culturalism.

The question of the popular and affective in reading the commodified cultural practices of the daily such as film melodrama, therefore, is this: Does melodrama stage the performative display of self-enclosed/self-affective power conflicts in society or, as Marx argued, is it part of “the history of *industry*” and therefore part of “the *open* book of the essential powers of man, man’s psychology present in tangible form” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 244)? The question is, in other words, is melodrama capable of producing knowledge that the structure of people’s “wants and pleasures” is an effect of labor and that the structures of feeling available in a society are always tied to their economic arrangements? When the global (socioeconomic) history of the affective is uncovered, what is revealed is that there is nothing spontaneous and resistant about people’s feelings at all, because, as Marx explains, “our wants and pleasures have their origin in society” and are not therefore measured “in relation to the objects which serve for their gratification” but always “in relation to society” (*Wage-Labour* 33). Because of the social division of labor between those who work for a living and those whose ownership of the means



of production allows them to live off the labor of others “enjoyment and labour, production and consumption” always “devolve on different individuals” (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 45). The affectivity of melodrama that is seen as “excessive” and “resistant” in the dominant cultural studies is a form of false consciousness of class relations that corresponds to the actual class interest of the capitalists against the workers. Melodrama in the popular imaginary occults and mystifies the structure of society and translates its crises and contradictions into matters of the heart. Melodrama fetishizes the affective by cutting it off from industrial production and thereby trivializes people’s emotions. Rather than constructing people’s emotions as rooted in class and producing a global knowledge of them, such a global knowledge is rather positioned in melodrama as the inhuman other of a passionate involvement with the world as it is and that therefore takes “what is” as “what ought to be.” In the global melodrama of contemporary transnational capitalism, the inhuman other is always coded as those in whom knowledge has suppressed their emotional freedom so as to scapegoat theory for social change as outdated in the world without borders. Thus, in *Erin Brockovich* it is the lawyers (professionals) who continually are shown as providing alibis for the corporate powers that be by blaming people’s “lifestyle” for their health problems, which are actually the result of the “environmental” pollution of industry. Their knowledge skills are positioned against the “people skills” of Erin who shares the worker’s lifestyle and herself experiences the prejudice of her boss and coworkers for it. Class as culture and affective knowing (being “in touch” with the people and experiencing cultural oppression) is thus placed against elitist knowledge (theory) as the means to effect change while knowledge is turned into a matter of “people skills” (cultural values).

Because the global crisis of capitalism has become impossible to ignore, melodrama has become the site of a basic class contradiction. This is the contradiction between the role of melodrama in reproducing the cultural needs of exploited workers and its more basic function, which is to maintain a high rate of profit for the capitalist. It is no surprise therefore that critics, in the attempt to revive interest in the form by making it seem relevant to the conflicts of the times, have come to identify melodrama as a genre of “crisis.” Peter Brooks reads melodrama as a form of material “resistance” and agency because of its anti-normative stylistic excesses that, he claims, sutures the spectator into an affective zone of interiority following the loss of the sacred in modern society. He argues that melodrama offers a moral solution to the unresolvable social contradictions of modernity due

to the collapse of the sacred into the political following the French Revolution. Melodrama thus provides a “moral occult”—a “realm of meaning and value . . . masked by the surface of reality” (5)—to manage the social crisis unleashed by the revolutionary desacralization of social life that still depends upon “the individual’s ‘sacrifice to the ideal’” (6) for the reproduction of the social order. Melodrama is thus an instance of what Foucault calls “political technology” because it installs a new structure of feeling in the world. For Brooks this new feeling is the assumption of an “act of interpretation” (what Foucault, following Nietzsche, called “conscience”) in everyday life in a world that constantly confronts the subject with the need to take sides in the ongoing struggles. Brooks thus displaces the class basis of the social crisis by representing history in a voluntarist way, as the emergence of the traumatic in social life provoking a universal search for stable meaning. Such a move makes positive and reliable knowledge of the world, independent of the subject, impossible. Such a view of the crisis as the loss of transcendence normalizes capitalism by treating history as the scene of an empty repetition—the eternal return of what Žižek, for example, understands as the traumatic traversal of the fantasmatic unity of the hegemonic Symbolic order—without the basic continuity of and conflicts over the social resources produced by labor.

One sees the same normalization of crisis dramatized in popular contemporary melodramas such as *Erin Brockovich* in the “uncanny” consciousness skills of the working mother played by Julia Roberts, which “shocks” the knowledge elite (the cadre of corporate lawyers she works with) by its sheer acuity—coming as it does from such an “unexpected” source. It is the same spontaneous knowledge that, by contrast, is coded as “people skills” that makes her an “organic intellectual” of the working-class community, which has been medically devastated by the corporate polluting of their ground water. Erin’s uncanny skills are shown to place her “in touch” with the lives of the workers in a way that is not available to “classy” professionals. Her subjectivity—what in real life Erin Brockovich Ellis refers to as women’s “compassion” that she thinks is central to the “American Spirit” (Interview), and which in the narrative of pleasure provided by the film is simply called “boobs”—is thus central to the way the film displaces class from production relations to superstructural relations by recoding class as knowledge skills (cultural values). “People skills”/“American Spirit”/“boobs” are code words for a kind of consciousness that cannot be explained by the existing relations of production, which are thus immunized from critique. What such a

voluntarist notion of agency as knowledge does is produce an occult critique of the existing that mystifies the actual dependence of labor on the wages provided by capital so as to naturalize the historically specific bourgeois appropriation of surplus value and protect it from critique. If workers can be shown to be ingenious at finding resources and making do with what exists, then there is no need for the revolutionary expropriation of property and the reappropriation of their alienated social wealth from the capitalist class. Contemporary melodrama is all about finding such pockets of resistance within the daily and providing the subject with the consciousness skills to cope with things as they are.

The same mystification of capital as life skills was popularized in the '90s by public intellectuals such as Hernando de Soto and Pierre Bourdieu in such organs of finance capital as *The New York Times* and *The London Financial Times*. "Capital," in Bourdieu for example, functions as the basis of social commonality, as in Weberian sociology generally, as "income" and cultural "skill" that is merely inequitably distributed as "life chances" on the market and not, as in Marx, as property, the objective material basis that allows a minority parasitical to social production to exploit the labor of the majority. In classical Marxism *capital* is precisely what *divides* the working class from the capitalist class: capital is the accumulated surplus value extracted by the bourgeois owners who, having monopolized the means of production, have forced the majority of people to engage in unpaid surplus labor in order to survive. In Bourdieu, capital doesn't divide people materially (in production), it unites them culturally (in the market). According to Bourdieu, capital is anything capable of being culturally valued and whose possession establishes group distinctions ("habitus") and thus motivates competition and rivalry over the "symbolic profits" accruing around social status markers (like "boobs"). The working class need not engage in class struggle because it can just make do by voluntarily refashioning its cultural values into marketable assets, as does Erin Brockovich in the imagined reality of contemporary melodrama.

The formalist approach to melodrama normalizes the historical conflicts into empty signifiers of symbolic and traumatic "crises" that are meant to reveal the decentered basis of the social and thus occult the ideological function of melodrama in the class struggle—by, for example, conflating those moments when melodrama serves to normalize the division of labor by mystifying the social basis of life and those moments in which it has served the people by clarifying the daily struggles. Thus, other cultural critics responding to the crisis

of melodrama under global capitalism have situated its intelligibility more specifically in cultural struggles over meaning and have refused ascribing a meta-historical significance to the form. Brooks' argument that melodrama provides a moral resolution to symbolic conflicts is thus opposed in the writing about melodrama today on grounds that it fails to deal with the "specificity" of melodrama, its insertion into social struggles, and "regimes of discourse" (the academy, Hollywood star-system, queer camp, etc.). But cultural struggle here is diffused into local struggles and follows Foucault's conservative reading of culture as contingent struggles over power that are assumed to be unaffected by economic determination, and the object of which is to open discourse to other "voices." To bring to bear the productive base of social practices as a critique of the superstructure is considered an elitist move on this localized reading of popular culture because it violates the fetish of "pleasure," which is considered the spontaneous political agency of marginalized "voices" (the body of the other excluded from dominant representations). Popular consciousness is supposed to be "mobilized" by the excessiveness of the melodrama, its difference from the normative regime of values imposed by dominant history and power, and thus enabling because it allows the "voice" of the other to be heard. But this is really populist sentimentality, which actively denies the centrality of class in social life, the fact that before one is politically oppressed as a latino, lesbian, woman, and so on, one is socially exploited by being inserted into labor relations that culture functions to legitimate. The constituencies whose voice is considered to be marginalized are in fact divided by class and for the most part consist of wage-laborers who have an alienated relation to culture because of their separation from the social means of production and the wealth it produces, not because they are formally excluded from dominant institutions and have no "voice." What global workers need is not more freedom of speech, which trivializes the needs of working people, but freedom from exploitation.

The ideological effect of contemporary melodrama is not in the "story," which tends to be clichéd and familiar anyway, nor in the manner that the story is figured in the zone of the affective through special camera and lighting effects, how it formally stages subjective fantasies, for example, but more in the way the story is imag(in)ed. When referring to the "imag(in)ed" story of contemporary melodrama, I mean more than its self-enclosed processes of signification and excessive disavowals—such a reading would simply return cultural criticism to formalist readings. The imag(in)ed text refers to the placing of the subject in labor relations with a false consciousness of

these relations—either as relations voluntarily entered into or as the performative display of the cultural politics of subjectivity—that correspond to the alienated reality of capitalism. I take the dominance of the imag(in)ed text in contemporary melodrama over “story” and “signification” as evidence of my argument that what at any moment is considered “affective” is itself an effect of the ensemble of the social relations.

Take *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2001), or *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), for example. These films can be said to be melodramatic because of how they engage with class antagonism (by containing class to the superstructure as differences in knowledge “skills” and cultural “taste”) while at the same time they are concerned to provide a global image of agency beyond class in the transvaluation of the cultural symbolic order where class has been contained by the dominant ideology. In *The Matrix*, for example, class is re-signified as knowledge of the matrix itself, the virtual reality of twenty-first-century capitalism that covers over the reality of a postapocalyptic world enslaved by machines. It is on this knowledge base that agency is figured in the film as a conflict between those who know the real and choose to fight and sacrifice the passionate attachments implanted in them by the matrix (Neo, Trinity, Morpheus), while they use it as a medium to liberate others, and those who, despite knowing the truth, choose the matrix anyway (Cypher) because they refuse to sacrifice their personal pleasure for the collective good. Similarly, in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* there are two orders in which people are divided: the “official” order represented by the Wudan code of monastic-feudal society and the “outlaw” order of Giang Hu, composed of “tigers and dragons” and ruled by the bandit code of “kill or be killed.” Agency here is gained not by those who use their knowledge skills to liberate the oppressed (such as Jade Fox [Cheng Pei Pei] who has stolen the Wudan knowledge because it is used to keep women subordinate to men), or to liberate themselves (such as Li Mu Bai [Chow Yun Fat] who has discovered that enlightenment is merely just a “deep and sorrowful silence”), but by Jen Yu (Zhang Ziyi), who as an outlaw aristocrat occupies a hybrid location. Jen Yu values personal freedom over everything else and makes the Wudan knowledge, which she has helped Jade Fox steal, her own private property by refusing to teach her accomplice how to use it fully (for ending patriarchy). Ang Lee calls her the “real hero” of the film (Lee).

What is effective about these melodramas and what makes them so popular is not what is endlessly reiterated in the culture industry

and retained in the memory of the viewer: it is not the sensational “look” of these films in relation to others, the way that the use of “wire-work” (*Crouching Tiger*) or “bullet-time” photography (*The Matrix*) reworks on-screen action to please the viewer, for example. Nor, of course, is it the story lines, which are based on empty New-Age-y premises that repeat familiar religious themes that have become the mantras of cyber-business culture and sold as self-management techniques by business gurus on Dr. Phil and late night infomercials. Neither is the effect of these films a matter of how their innovative “look” makes “appealing” the message big business wishes to “communicate” to the audience. What makes them popular is their imaginative and affirmative placing of the postmodern worker into the newer flexible managerial systems of cyber-capitalism, which is staged as a virtual reality in *The Matrix* and as “a realm under the surface of society and the rule of law, called Giang Hu” (139) in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: a realm imag(in)ed purely as an arena of symbolic struggles over social status where knowledge determines one’s class position rather than labor.

These films are popular because they are concerned with retraining the workforce in the kinds of consciousness skills needed by newer, more flexible, labor relations, which have massively privatized the means of social reproduction. At the same time, they are alienated products of bourgeois production based on profit, which determines that change can only take place in a commodified form as local innovation rather than situate agency collectively as the global praxis of labor. Personal invention (reevaluation) rather than social transformation (revolution) depends on the naturalization of labor relations (private property), as that bedrock real that cannot be changed. When workers consume *The Matrix* or *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* they are being provided with the consciousness skills of a highly advanced capitalist society and are being ideologically trained to see change in an alienated way, as separate from social relations as a whole and therefore as spontaneous/voluntarist, making for a more compliant workforce open to the terms of social reproduction of class relations under capitalism. It is the need for the ideological construction of a compliant workforce that makes agency in today’s melodramas always appear to be a matter of spontaneous (volunteerist) skills subverting normative hierarchies: from the uncanny cognitive skills of Matt Damon in *Good Will Hunting* (Gus Van Sant, 1997) or Julia Roberts in *Erin Brockovich* (2000) that makes their characters upwardly mobile; to the elaborate narrative performatives of *The Notebook* (Nick Cassavetes, 2004) where an older Noah has to daily reconstruct his

relationship to Allie, who has lost her memory to Alzheimer's, by reading to her the story she's written of their youthful romance that subverts the class divide between them by constructing an image of him as a self-made man; to the young democrats' voluntary rejection of "foreign aid" and embrace of the values of self-determination in Ousmane Sembène's *Guelwaar* (1992); or of the Maori tribal resistance to the values/practices of patriarchal modernity in *Once Were Warriors* (Lee Tamahori, 1995), to name a few.

The governing logic of the global melodrama of today in which class conflicts are central, albeit represented as cultural conflicts, is that the spontaneous experience of oppression transforms fixed regimes of power. It is the old popular front ideology of "people vs. power bloc" now passing as "democracy against capitalism" on the North Atlantic Left by those such as Ellen Meiksins Wood, who follows E. P. Thompson and argues that

because production relations are experienced by subordinate classes in their own particular ways. . . they can come into contradiction with the "common-sense of power"; and it is such contradictions that produce the struggles which determine the reorganization and transformation of modes of production. (*Democracy* 65)

On these terms the raw experience of oppression and displacement leads to revolutionary changes without the need for materialist theory. This populist logic is valorized in the global melodrama of cyber-capitalism by being imag(in)ed as resistant to capitalism, by giving the worker a false consciousness of class that turns capitalism and class into cultural matters. In this cyber-imaginary, global cultural changes, such as the Internet and the new eco-friendly lifestyle politics, are supposed to have empowered the people against totalitarian structures by decentering and deregulating their lives so that they can find freedom in the local and everyday, the sphere of consumption, rather than, as in the past, through class struggle over the socioeconomic conditions of production. The dominance of this view has even produced a soap-operatic leftism.

Rosemary Hennessy's *Profit and Pleasure*, for example, is rooted in the notion that politics is basically a community activity. In bourgeois cultural criticism, the idea of "community activity" is a code term that signals the substitution of shared "ideas," "assumptions," and "emotions" for "class" solidarity. What, therefore, lies at the core of "community" is not a structure (class) but a "feeling" (emotional intensity). Hennessy, who is not as subtle as Žižek, is quite open about

the valorization of “feeling” (“opened her heart” [xii], “feisty politics” [xii], “precious friendship” [xiii], “a path with heart” [xiii], “warmth and love” [xiii]). The mark of membership in her imagined community is “heartache”: in this evaluative social scheme, she who has felt the most “heartache” (emotional intensity) is the most authentic member of the community. This appeal to a “comradeship” based on the intensity of “feeling” clearly indicates that no matter what Marxist or quasi-Marxist language Hennessy uses elsewhere in her book, she basically believes that people’s lives are changed not by revolutionary praxis but by encountering other “feeling” people: “During the last year of writing this book, I met . . . and my life has not been the same since” (xiii). The lesson of this encounter, Hennessy indicates, was not the classic lessons of Marxism that social change is a product of structural change, but that social change comes about by means of something called “revolutionary love” (*amor revolucionario*, xiii), which—according to her—has taken her “time and again to the other side” (*llevarme una y otra vez al otro lado*, xiii). The other lesson is the danger of vanguardism: “revolutionary love” has also reminded her that “power is finally and always in the hands of the people” (*el poder es finalmente y siempre en los manos de la gente*, xiii)—people as spontaneous actors. This activist subject whose agency lies in civil society rather than production is of course central to normalizing the neoliberal order. It is the new citizenship of post-national market subject who is driven by imperatives of consumption rather than class.

Melodrama has always been a popular way to represent class conflicts in emotionally dramatic ways while naturalizing and normalizing the division of labor. This is not surprising because, as one critic puts it, melodrama emerged as a popular way to “deal with the dynamics of early capitalist economics” (Elsaesser 73), dynamics that have, as Marx and Engels predicted, “simplified the class antagonisms” on a global scale, splitting up society “into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (*Reader* 474). Take the way, for example, in which Thomas Elsaesser calls Balzac’s “vital and melodramatic” experience of “early” capitalism sounds more like a description of the contradictions of “late” transnational capitalism.

The good/evil dichotomy has almost disappeared, and the Manichean conflicts have shifted away from questions of morality to the paradoxes of psychology and economics. What we see is a Schopenhauerian struggle of the will: the ruthlessness of industrial entrepreneurs and bankers, the spectacle of an uprooted, “decadent” aristocracy still holding tremendous political power, the sudden twists of fortune with



no-good parasites becoming millionaires overnight (or vice versa) through speculation and the stock exchange, the antics hangers-on, parvenus and cynical artist-intellectuals, the demonic, spell-binding potency of money and capital, the contrasts between abysmal poverty and unheard of affluence and waste which characterized the “anarchic” phase of industrialization and high finance. (73)

By privatizing melodrama as a “mode of experience” (74) specific to a “given historical and social context” (72) of “intense social and ideological crisis” (70), Elsaesser quietly displaces class struggle to an “earlier” time (an “‘anarchic’ phase of industrialization and high finance”) and announces a new post-class moment free of the contradictions of the past. By reifying the affective in this way—taking it out of the ongoing conflicts over the social real of class arrangements—culturalist theory makes melodrama a populist apologetic of capitalism. Melodramas have in fact always served to contain rather than deepen the class antagonism in this way by concealing class relations under a “sensational” and “catastrophic” façade that “attract[s] a heterogeneous public, the majority, avid for illusions” in a world that “demands action from them and, at the same time, eliminates all possibilities for that action” (Alea 111–2). I use the term “(post) melodrama” for the culturalist ideology, which always considers melodrama “popular” because it provides a “post-class” space that resolves the antagonisms in the superstructural imaginary where they become matters of an “affective” pedagogy that naturalizes class inequality. (Post)melodrama has become an institution in the culture industry because it has become impossible to ignore or otherwise escape the effects of the class polarization of the globe. (Post)melodrama displaces root knowledge of the class conflicts for the enslaved market subject who finds it impossible to take sides in a world of side taking, because to do so would compromise their access to consumption.

The popularity of melodrama has usually been made an idealist matter by attributing it to the openness of the form, either because it is considered a transparent representation of people’s “lived experience,” or because in its opacity it gives a post-mimetic representation that displays the constructedness of the real (a regional contradiction I will focus on later). In cultural studies as it is currently constituted, a formal division is thus maintained between “ideology” (as discourse) and the cultural “real,” the effect of which is to place the social in excess of representation in such a way as to make it unavailable for transformation. The pedagogical effect of this split, which perhaps carries the most important political consequences for engaging the contestation over melodrama, is whether the cultural real is read as a

“utopian” counter-hegemonic space from which to organize difference into a seamless existential identity (as in Benjamin, Brooks, Elsaesser, Lang, Klinger, Byars) or the real as a sublime excess that deregulates “desire,” making it unavailable for anchorage in the social and the formation of consensus (as in the writings of Althusser, Butler, Hays and Nikolopoulou). However, what this internal division prioritizes is the question *how* experience is represented in melodrama, which at most considers agency to be a local question of “re-description” of the ideological (as in Foucault’s localism of “where there is power, there is resistance,” *History* 95), and not *why* the dispersal of the social into the local and affective, as is found in melodrama, is needed by capitalism to alibi class relations. For this reason there needs to be a critique of the contemporary construction of the popularity of melodrama because it occludes the class struggle between those who own (exploiters) and those who must work for them (exploited).

What I call (post)melodrama refers to those practices that diffuse culture into a multiplicity of attachments that constitutes the common sense of cyber-capitalism, which locates agency in knowledge (values) rather than labor (need). The critique of (post)melodrama that I am making provides an opportunity for explaining Marxist theory of melodrama as popular to the extent that it surfaces the class conflicts over the real.

I understand that what I am calling “popular” or “global melodrama” and placing in opposition to contemporary (post)melodrama is similar to the way Tomás Gutiérrez Alea theorizes the difference between “popular film” and “people’s film” in his essay, “The Viewer’s Dialectic.” “Popular cinema,” he explains, is the cinema of commodification in the sense that it “attract[s] a heterogeneous public, the majority, avid for illusions” (111), and it does so by becoming a “costly and complex industry” that “has had to invent all kinds of formulae and recipes in order that the show it offers pleases the broadest public” (112) so as to make a profit, rather than serving as “an expression of the people—of the sectors most oppressed and exploited by an alienating system of production” (111), as does the “people’s cinema.” What I call (post)melodrama is like Alea’s “popular cinema” in that it has “been the major vehicle used to encourage viewers’ false illusions” as well as “the most effective expression of a culture of the masses as a function of passive consumers, of contemplating and heartbroken spectators” in a world that “demands action from them and, at the same time, eliminates all possibilities for that action” (112). On the other hand, what I am calling “popular” or “global melodrama” is like what Alea calls the “people’s cinema” in

that it is “popular, because it express[es] the interests, aspirations and values of broad sectors of the population” that are “carrying history onward” (113). Alea’s praxical conclusion is that “*popular* ought to respond not only to immediate interests (expressed in the need to enjoy oneself, to play, to abandon oneself to the moment, to elude . . .) but also to basic needs and to the final objective: transforming reality and bettering mankind” (111). Therefore, as Alea concludes, “if we want to find some kind of concrete criterion of what *popular* means it is necessary to know what those people represent . . . in terms of the historical moment and their specific class” (115). It is only in accordance with the objective criterion of class that foregrounds the “basic” and “vital needs” of the people that Alea’s theory of the popular enables us to expose the dissimulations of transnational capitalism in (post)melodrama and explain how “an authentically popular cinema” will only be possible “in a socialist society” (115) that has abolished wage-labor.

What is normatively framed in writing on melodrama as a split between a “mimetic” or “modern” aesthetic (e.g., Brooks; Benjamin) and an “avant-garde” or “postmodern” cultural politics (e.g., Hays and Nikolopoulou, Butler) has monopolized debate and broadly divides research in the field. That it is a staged debate with a predetermined outcome is evident in that both sides represent melodrama as a self-enclosed regime of discourse with no necessary connection to the laws of motion of capitalism. I therefore use the concept (post)melodrama to draw out the continuity across what is considered, because of the historical overtones associated with “postmodernism,” an epochal shift in theorizing melodrama. The “postmodern” writings on melodrama are actually more like neomodern texts because of the way they posit the agency of culture as the resistance embodied in consumption and mystify the political economy of the subject. That they do so on the argument that melodrama is popular and more radically democratic because of its textual excesses than are the more self-reflexive *auteurist* works celebrated in high modernism does not really constitute so important a distinction as to justify the “post” prefix in distinguishing writing on melodrama. More important is to see such a distinction in the context of changing modalities of labor practices as providing the kinds of consciousness skills needed under the globalizing economy. “(Post)melodrama” is meant to indicate this local shift in capitalist subjectivities that maintains the class binary in the totality. Changes in how melodrama has been produced and consumed and “imag(in)ed” reflect broader social changes in the social division of labor. I would now like to examine these changes more closely.

I read melodrama in four ways, which depend on how cultural conflicts were being engaged in ideology under the impact of changes in capitalism. All reify a cultural zone of spontaneity (of “affectivity” and “popular-ity”) from “*everyday, material industry*” (Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” 244) under the impact of globalizing cyber-capitalism:

1. Humanist melodrama considered a generic “fictional system for making sense of experience” (Brooks xvii), nostalgic about a past community of meaning in which “fiction” and “experience” were strictly demarcated.
2. A purely cinematic modern “anti-melodrama” with its auteurist aesthetics of “irony” in which melodrama is read as an elaborate tropics of “unfreedom” (Elsaesser 88) plotting “the agonies that have accompanied the demise of the ‘affirmative culture.’” (89)
3. The “neomelodramas” of neoliberalism that read melodrama as “discourse,” i.e., an “allegory of reading” about “the construction and contestation of the mimetic illusion itself” as an “occasion to trace the repeated transformation of . . . gendered gestures from a promised mimesis into a subversive performativity” (Butler, “Melodramatic Repetition” 3–4) which represents a dogmatic turn to the voluntarist subjectivity of the free market.
4. The activist “(post)melodrama” of today in which, as in Althusser, melodrama is read as an “immanent critique” of ideology because it is “decentered” or “marked by an internal disassociation, an unresolved alterity” (Althusser, “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’” 142) that is believed to constitute the cultural real. In (post)melodrama the performance “*is* the spectator’s consciousness” (150) which is itself “incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this incompleteness itself” toward “the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life.” (151)

The “classic” or “humanist” melodrama theorized by Walter Benjamin (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*) and Peter Brooks (*The Melodramatic Imagination*) is premised on a Hegelian view of history as the agency of culture. Hegel saw modernity as a “period of transition” in which “the spirit of the time . . . disintegrates one fragment after another of the structure of the previous world,” while “the wealth of the bygone life . . . is still consciously present in recollection” (*Phenomenology* 75–6) because it is embedded in the cultural archive. Humanist readings of melodrama are framed as a critical

project to “restore” to the cultural archive its buried, popular utopian function. Under the expansion and consolidation of capitalism in the West after both world wars and the impact of market forces that were commodifying the “lifeworld” and “subjectivity,” critics reacted with a nostalgia for an earlier form of capitalism characterized by a lower level of contradiction. Readings of melodrama functioned as myth at these times to secure what was seen as a lost communal totality in which individuals were freer of the market logic that has changed the world into a global factory.

For example, in the writings of traditional liberal humanists such as Brooks, melodrama is read as a “sense making enterprise” (xvii) that “represents both the urge toward resacralization and the impossibility of conceiving sacralization other than in personal terms” (16) in times when “there is no universally accepted social code” (21). On this view, history is seen as constituted by a break with the past, a crisis that moves the subject away from the cultural common sense that provides him with a “meaningful” existence. Melodrama thus acts as therapy for the culturally orphaned subject by representing a “greater aesthetic self-consciousness” (xvi), a “mode of conception and expression . . . for making sense of experience” through “the discovery of meaning” in the “act of interpretation itself” (Brooks xvii).

The humanist mode of intelligibility in cultural theory put forward by Brooks assumes that culture is free of material and conceptual conflicts and is the space of the aesthetic. In this view, culture is above politics, economics, and theory, and provides a zone where the subject has access to an emotional plenitude that negates the dehumanizing imperatives of modern life and returns him to his essential humanity. A list of humanist cultural critics may include such diverse writers as Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, Lionel Trilling, Cleanth Brooks, George Steiner, Herbert Marcuse, Simone de Beauvoir, E. P. Thompson, Paul Goodman, and Gertrude Himmelfarb. These different writers, despite their intellectual and political differences, all share a commitment to culture as transcending daily life, which is itself placed in the position of being inauthentic and oppressive of the spontaneous agency of the subject. What makes the subject differs within and between different humanist positions—desire, reason, or moral choice, for example, have all been made essential to what it means to be human—but the basic form of the subject is the same: it is a being uniquely capable of genuine thoughts and feelings whose authentic expression and communication provides moving experiences that stand to “humanize” the world. Culture is thus the tradition of ideas and works that distinguishes man as unique in nature.

The humanist mode of reading culture is residual in the contemporary, and its fundamental premises have been radically called into question by postmodern cultural theory, which argues that with changes in the technologies of writing, foundational understandings of culture that posit a fundamental binary between culture and “not culture” are epistemologically and politically suspect as they must foreclose awareness of the materiality of culture itself. Brooks has argued for the hegemonic function of melodrama in cultural theory on the grounds that its framing of experience is “an inescapable and central form of our cultural lives” (xii) that is “vital to the modern imagination” (xv). He has therefore been criticized for making “over-arching generalizations about affect” by excluding “the ways in which melodrama served as a crucial space in which the cultural, political and economic exigencies” are “played out and transformed into public discourses” (Hays and Nikolopoulou viii). In a newer preface to his text, Brooks defends himself from such criticism by reiterating the normative containment function provided by melodrama:

One of the heartening characteristics of our moment in intellectual and scholarly life is that we are all reading one another—to the extent that we are able—across disciplinary boundaries, with a sense of recognition, and a sense that the aesthetic and cultural stakes are the same. What we have learned . . . is that the melodramatic mode no longer needs to be approached in the mode of apology . . . we have also learned that it . . . can do things for us that other genres and modes can't. Perhaps melodrama alone is adequate to contemporary psychic affect. It has the flexibility, the multifariousness, to dramatize and to explicate life in imaginative forms that transgress the traditional generic constraints, and the traditional demarcations of high culture from popular entertainment. (xii)

Thus the study of melodrama brings its own melodramatic rewards (it is “heartening”) in that it recovers the ideological function of the “popular” to bring about “the greatest mixture of social classes” (xvi) in an economically pragmatic way, by “transgressing” social divisions (such as “high”/“low culture” and “humanism”/“postmodernism”), in other words, by simply masking the class antagonisms at the level of theory and culture through an aesthetic relay. To reiterate, what is popular in the humanist tradition is an aesthetics of privation (e.g., Brooks’ “psychic affect”) that occults knowledge of the class inequality that makes the social antagonisms. Thus, for Brooks melodrama functions as a kind of post-ideological “third way” in which class antagonism disappears in the moral homilies of “good” prose: “While

its social implications may be variously revolutionary or conservative, it is in all cases radically democratic, striving to make its representations clear and legible to everyone" (15).

In his study of German *Trauerspiel* (mourning-plays) written by Protestants under the Counter-Reformation of the seventeenth century, Walter Benjamin provides an earlier example of the humanist position in what has become a tutor-text of neo-marxist cultural theory. In his text on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (written in 1925 and published for the first time in English in 1977), Benjamin reads the origin of cultural modernity as due to a crisis of "sovereignty" that has brought about a permanent "state of emergency," an "aversion to constitutive ideas" (40), in general, and a "fragmenting" of scientific knowledge, in particular, into multidisciplines that do not cohere into a universally valid system of truth (33). Because Benjamin considers the idea of the sovereignty of the State to have withered away since the seventeenth-century popular revolutionary movements did away with the divine right of kings, his theory of history proposes that theory itself has become an ethical matter because, as a result of these developments, it is "quite impossible" he says,

to derive an easy moral satisfaction... from the tyrant's end. For if the tyrant falls, not simply in his own name, as an individual, but as a ruler and in the name of mankind and history, then his fall has the quality of a judgment, in which the subject too is implicated. (72)

Benjamin's investment in cultural politics essentially undermines the radical project of cultural theory as it can no longer be seen as able to provide reliable and positive knowledge of the world needed to change it. Instead, cultural theory assumes primarily an ethico-aesthetic function for Benjamin, who uses the crisis of meaning unleashed by modernity as an opportunity to "restore, by representation, the primacy of the symbolic character of the word... by recalling in memory the primordial form of perception" (36), which for him is found in the baroque tragic dramatic use of "allegory." Benjamin's cultural theory is thus an instance of "redemptive critique" (Habermas, quoted in Wolin 29–77), what Benjamin himself understood as the recovery of the "truth content" of works (their situatedness under specific material conditions) from their "material content" (their immediate form of appearance) so as to reactivate a sense of the historicity of the present. A redemptive critique consists of restoring through a hermeneutic operation an "existential" or organic unity of consciousness in the cultural archive that has been forgotten due to

the desacralizing of cultural texts by historic progress. In Benjamin's *Origin* this existential unity is considered the "truth-content" of baroque allegory as a utopian longing for the sacred—a world without class contradictions—which had to be coded under the dictatorship of the Church during the Counter-Reformation in the guise of "mourning," a universal condition of creaturely existence given over to despair because of the excess and intractability of the contemporary political contradictions.

Benjamin reads *Trauerspiel* as an earlier attempt to restore the need for the sacred by emphasizing the "fallen" and "creaturely" status of humanity associated with the spread of modernity. As an example, take the fragment by Christoph Männing from his *Theatre of Death* (1692) that Benjamin places as an epigraph to the final chapter on "Allegory and *Trauerspiel*":

Whosoever would grace this frail cottage, in which poverty adorns every corner, with a rational epitome, would be making no inept statement nor overstepping the mark of well-founded truth if he called the world a general store, a customs-house of death, in which man is the merchandise, death the wondrous merchant, God the most conscientious book-keeper, but the grave the bonded draper's hall and ware house. (*Origin* 159)

The effect of the inscription is not to argue, following Marx, that religion is "the heart of a heartless world" (Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*) that has been overtaken by the desacralizing imperative of the commodity form. On Benjamin's terms, such a materialist insight would be equated with the surface "material content" of the text that is already hegemonically constituted in the historicism of existing society. The point of the inscription, rather, is the "existential" truth it contains, in which religion and commerce function as metaphorical elaboration of a spirit of mourning that has been forgotten in the contemporary. This is the "truth-content" of the baroque age Benjamin seeks to hermeneutically "redeem" so as to restore a popular subjectivity in the present. According to Benjamin, the popular originally emerged from the cultural conflicts of seventeenth-century Europe in so far as the "thesis of the age" required "spirit," understood as "both strict inner discipline and unscrupulous external action," in order "to exercise dictatorship" (98). The valorization of spirit brought into being a reaction of "faith": "a mood of mourning [*Trauer*] in the creature stripped of all naïve impulses" that "opens the way for the unlimited compromise with the world" (98) from which baroque culture



“extracts a profusion of things which customarily escaped the grasp of artistic formulation” (66) and which “bore the imprint of the absolutist maxim: everything for the people, nothing by the people themselves” (48–9). In other words, absolutism constructed the popular as an abject zone of longing for spirit so as to legitimize itself, and in the process it aestheticized everyday life.

Benjamin’s turning to the popular culture of baroque allegory was part of his own articulation of a messianic project to restore the hegemonic function of the State during a revolutionary “state of emergency.” He understood the state of emergency as a “constitutional position” that establishes a unity between constituted “power” and constitutive “faith” and, thereby, “guarantees the continuity of the community” (*Origin* 65) under dictatorship. Its potential to perform such a popular function, he believed, was due to the fact that while the “present day heirs of the baroque writers . . . if not actually hostile to the state, that is revolutionary” are “characterized by the absence of any idea of the state” (56), and are for this reason ignorant of the popular need for a hegemonic authority, “the baroque writer felt bound in every particular to the ideal of an absolutist constitution” (56) and therefore preserved the presently lacking ideal of community in modern society. In short, Benjamin believed that hegemony makes faith in a post-class utopia necessary at the same time that it makes actual social emancipation impossible. Both “spirit” (power) and “faith” (mourning) are revealed to be extreme moral codes that, although originating from a historically specific political antagonism (Catholic absolutism vs. Protestant revolutionism), constitute the matrix of the modern totality according to Benjamin. He turns to a restorationist cultural milieu because he sees the “national” orthodoxy of his day as blind to its own hegemony in marginalizing the melodramatic heritage of the *Trauerspiel* and thus blind to its own role in exacerbating the loss “of any idea of the state” to the point of fomenting a contemporary “extreme” “revolutionary” “hostility” to it. Thus, his critique of contemporary German philology was that it could not authentically fulfill its national-popular function because in the cultural sphere, where the issue was preserving the “spirit” of “the literary heritage of Germany,” it marginalized the “non-popular” (but populist) baroque *Trauerspiel*:

The drama, more than any other literary form, needs a resonance in history. Baroque drama has been denied this resonance. The renewal of the literary heritage of Germany, which began with romanticism, has, even today, hardly touched baroque literature . . . German

philology looked on the totally non-popular efforts of an educated bureaucracy with suspicion. Notwithstanding the genuine importance of what these men did for the language and the national heritage, and notwithstanding their conscious participation in the development of a national literature—their work too obviously bore the imprint of the absolutist maxim: everything for the people, nothing by the people themselves, to be able to win over [the] philologists . . . A spirit, which prevented them—although they were laboring on the construction of a German drama—from ever using the material of German popular culture. (*Origin* 48–9)

Benjamin's cultural *populism* valorizes “the totally non-popular efforts of an educated bureaucracy” that “bore the imprint of the absolutist maxim: everything for the people, nothing by the people themselves” and defends the dictatorial counterrevolutionary State as guarantor of “the continuity of the community” in utopia. His brand of cultural populism is what is now being turned to in cultural studies as the “essence” of Marxism because it teaches how it is “possible to read . . . a work of culture in order to reveal its message of transcendence and hope” (Grant 144), as, for example, in the religious turn evident in the later writings of Derrida (*Specters of Marx*), Badiou (*Saint Paul*), and Žižek (*The Puppet and the Dwarf*), to name a few. And yet, Benjamin's national-popular messianism and its nostalgic dream of a post-class State puts him in direct opposition to Marxist internationalism, which argues for exactly the opposite view of history—“the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (“Manifesto of the Communist Party”). This class consciousness of history is the other of Benjamin's messianic historiography, because as a theory of history it could only have emerged, as Marx and Engels explain, “since the establishment of Modern Industry and the world market, conquered for itself, in the modern representative State, exclusive political sway” (“Manifesto of the Communist Party” 486). The State, on these terms, is “but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” (486) in their united interest in exploiting the global working class and thus cannot serve as a compensatory utopian alternative to cultural alienation.

Writing on melodrama has of course changed since Benjamin's and Brooks' studies of it as a popular modern imaginary. Significantly, Brooks himself, who is considered to have written a “foundational text in theorizing the genre” (Bratton 1), now “applies Foucaultian theories of the body to his earlier conception” (2), displacing his previous focus on the “personal” (Brooks 16) as what is central to consolidating the modern symbolic order. What has not changed, however,

is the class politics. For example, although Hays and Nikolopoulou, as shown above, criticize the “excess-ive” view of melodrama in Brooks and the humanist tradition because it reifies aesthetic considerations from the broader cultural conflicts, they themselves situate melodrama in excess of history (as class struggle). On the grounds that “the genetic mutability of melodrama is a sign that it responds more to historical than to aesthetic demands” (xiv), they argue that melodrama has the function of “‘resolving’ the historical complexities that lie behind its intersecting horizons” (x) by “revising notions of value” (xi) and “refashioning . . . the terms that define interpersonal relations” (xi–xii). Thus, unlike the “closed historical narrative” of “the novel” that “elides” cultural and political struggles, melodrama, by incorporating “the discourses of imperialism, nationalism, and class conflict” (x), they argue, cannot serve a “canonical” function and, therefore, represents an “ideology of defeat that actually inverts the bourgeois ethos of moral superiority and altruism” (xi). Thus, melodrama represents a formally empty utopic space “not yet . . . fully codified” that can be “put to use either to imagine alternatives or to enforce the cultural paradigms that dominate” (xiv). In short, melodrama is made a matter of never-ending “ideological dynamics” (vii), by which, of course, is meant merely cultural struggles over “values,” that serves the purpose of mystifying rather than clarifying the materiality of culture as a site of class struggles over social resources.

In the cultural theory of Hays and Nikolopoulou, culture is itself material because it is the singular means as well as the medium in which the “sense of the real” is discursively constructed and the place of the subject in history and the social is primarily determined. “The entities discourse refers to are,” on this view, “constituted in and by discourse” (Hindess and Hirst 19–20). Culture, in other words, is not the other of a real world lying “out there” beyond the means with which we attempt to grasp it—what is “outside” (e.g., nature or truth) is really an effect of the “inside” of the modes of signification available in a culture. The discursivist cultural theory they represent is traced through a list of by now canonic signatures: Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard, Louis Althusser, Judith Butler, and bell hooks. I realize this list may seem problematic to some because of its inclusion of what are usually considered diverse theorists working on incommensurate problematics. Is not the “body” in Foucault different than the “body” in Barthes or Lacan? My argument here is that despite the apparent differences between Foucault’s analytics of the body as the object of “political technologies” and Barthes’ performatics of the “grain of

the voice” or Lacan’s “speaking subject,” they all consider materiality as an excessive nondiscursive “real” and as such conceptually opaque. Despite his criticisms of Lacan’s logocentrism, Derrida too, in his dense philosophical texts such as *Of Grammatology* as well as his performative writings such as *Glas*, understands materiality as basically matter: “différance” is not only an example of the undecidable play of language but also a tutor-text on the “materiality of the signifier.” And despite Althusser’s commitment to class analysis, his pluralization of production through the concept of “overdetermination” effectively argues against capitalism as a foundational concept and functions not much differently in social theory from what Derrida calls the “supplement.” Althusser’s deconstruction of the binary of base and superstructure, which is the order of determination in history, leads him to a merely descriptive social theory that reifies the localities of the social formation as ideological State apparatuses (the school, church, etc.) and takes as material “what is.” But “what is” is always a matter of the codes of culture that cannot grasp how “what is” came to be and why, through the class struggle inscribed in production.

What is material for discursivist cultural theory is the materiality of the signifier, the excessive differential slippage of the signifier over the series of signifieds. Since all conceptual oppositions emerge in the process of signification, and because human practices are conventionally made intelligible through the habitual repetition of linguistic codes, what is material is considered a “language effect.” Agency, on this view, is not a matter of “expressing” or “communicating” a human essence (logos) but rather is a matter of “paralogy” (Lyotard), the reiterative performance of linguistic acts that resignify and challenge the mode of intelligibility of the dominant discourses in a culture. Agency, in short, is a matter of what Lacan called “the agency of the letter” that eludes all attempts to halt signification and secure meaning in a culture, as difference is the origin of meaning and thus materially basic to knowing, as Derrida shows (*Margins of Philosophy* 1–27).

Rather than only reading the shift in writing on melodrama immanently and discursively as a movement from “closural” to “flexible” styles of thought, as in the dominant discursivist cultural studies, it is more important to see these characterizations themselves as an index of the historicity of changes in the division of labor from a national to a transnational basis. The shift in focus to a “flexible” and “pluralist” view of culture and movement away from a humanist aesthetic as “authoritarian” and “elitist,” as is normally found in postmodern writings on melodrama, is in actuality a labeling dictated by capital as

it deregulates on a world scale in order to facilitate the accumulation process.

The coding is done because previously capitalism needed a subject capable of synthesizing his experiences into an intelligible whole, that is, one who was capable of extracting a “meaning-full” pattern from the contradictions of his experience. What this imperative did was to normalize a certain division of labor that carried a more pronounced relation of authority between upper management and workers than exists now in the metropole. The “author” in the humanist tradition—who stands in for the authority of the culture—was thought to “create” meaning directly from his “experience” and deposit it into an integral “work.” The “reader” was expected to extract the “meaning” by showing that she had grasped the author’s “intention,” thus proving to be a responsible member of the community capable of being trusted with safeguarding the preestablished codes of the culture. The humanist view of culture made “sense” (i.e., was capable of reproducing the social relations) when labor was organized into a division between a higher managerial layer and a more broad layer of unskilled workers. Humanism fell into crisis when these relations changed due to advances in the forces of production.

These advances have de-skilled labor to a greater degree on a global scale so that anyone with a minimum of training can perform it, and the workers who do so are increasingly multinational and multicultural. As a result, the “managers” of the past have been transformed into wage-laborers so that under global capitalism there are basically two classes: exploiters and exploited. Thus, capitalism no longer needs the cumbersome apparatus of idealist humanist aesthetic found in Brooks’ or Benjamin’s writings on melodrama, but a more flexible regime of discourse as in Hays and Nikolopoulou, with a higher degree of tolerance of ambiguity. The discursive flexibility is necessary to contain the cultural crisis under capitalism in which culture stands revealed for the global majority as “mere training to act like a machine” (Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”)—that is, a performative operation lacking a principled basis of intelligibility outside its own repetition, for the production of pragmatic subjectivities who “go along” to “get along” under the existing state of things. Hays and Nikolopoulou fulfill this function in the most effective way by jettisoning the past norms while evacuating culture of its social function to reproduce labor relations under the “radical” alibi that power in class society is open to discursive change. Their surface theory of the social as “ideologically dynamic” mirrors the sensationalism of bourgeois melodrama to the same effect

of mystifying the social relations of production, while their merely descriptive theory of melodrama is seen as more concrete because it mirrors the specificity of the form. But by valorizing a merely semiotic democracy in melodrama, they support a cultural regime in which practice is naturalized as local pragmatics that maintains class inequality and dismiss socially transformative praxis to meet the needs of all. They actually miss the concrete specificity of melodrama too by occulting its praxical function in the division of labor. Melodrama has actually always been an effect of the fact that “men make their own history” but not “under circumstances chosen by themselves” (595), and thus it either “served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles... of magnifying the given tasks in imagination” or “parodying the old” and “taking flight from their solution in reality” (Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire” *Reader* 596).

Discursivist cultural theory is dominant, as it has incorporated the traditional ideas of cultural theory in ways that account for the plurality and artificiality of contemporary culture without simply dismissing them as “irrational” and “dehumanizing” forces against an ideal norm about what it essentially means to be human, supposedly uniquely reflected and expressed in Culture (the tradition of Great Works). However, discursivist cultural theory is being challenged by the emergent discourses of a materialist cultural theory that questions the exclusive focus on discourse as not very different from the humanist idealization of culture as free of the social. In these terms, the social is not just the mechanism of inscription of the subject, as humanist and discursivist theory both maintain, but social, as the relations of production. Such a critical practice traces itself in the texts of Theodor W. Adorno, Franz Fanon, Raymond Williams, Frederic Jameson, Jorge Larraín, and Barbara Foley, to name a few. These theorists have all in various ways provided valuable critiques of the process of capitalist reification that explains the idealization of culture as having its roots in the logic of capitalism.

Because of its dominance, discursivist cultural theory is usually seen as the limit of the political on the grounds that its foregrounding of the materiality of difference seems to privilege traditionally marginalized cultures whose sense of the real is articulated in other than monumental and essentialized terms, such as queer or black cultures (which themselves contain and marginalize internal differences like lesbian and brown), or “low” or popular culture, which is consumed for pleasures other than that of cultural negation, innovation, and transformation. But, this assumes that the conflicts and contradictions of the world are simply “differences” in lifestyles that form

around contrary significations and values rather than antagonisms that are based on social relations of power such as over the access to material resources.

Materialist cultural studies thus asks the question: Is it more enabling to see the binaries of race, for instance, as a cultural conflict that arises because of the privileging of certain values that will change with a change in the discourse we use to understand them? Or, is it more effective to see race as a material conflict over the power and wealth available in a society that although relayed in cultural terms always exceeds the fate of signs? Is the difference between popular culture and high culture simply a question of contrary value judgments over the status of, and attitude toward, pleasure in a culture, or is something materially at stake here regarding the possibility of a new society with greater cultural freedom than presently exists?

The needs of the working class—which always include a “moral and historical component” (Marx, *Wage-Labour*) such as the need for dramatic entertainment—are conditioned by the class position of the workers in the division of labor and can be understood only by grasping these basic arrangements. Because of the material crisis in social life under the regime of capital and wage-labor between production for meeting human needs (use-value) and production for profit (exchange-value), culture has always been the site of intense class conflicts. Melodrama has always been a more or less successful (i.e., popular) way to represent these conflicts in dramatic and imaginative ways while naturalizing and normalizing the division of labor. What Ernest Mandel wrote about the *Trivialliteratur* of crime stories is true for melodramas as well: They are

fuelled by an anxiety . . . , a contradiction between biological impulses and social constraints that bourgeois society has not solved, and indeed cannot solve . . . an objective need for the bourgeois class to reconcile awareness of the “biological fate” of humanity, of the violence of passions, of the inevitability of crime, with the defense of and apology for the existing social order. Revolt against private property becomes individualized . . . The criminalization of attacks on private property makes it possible to turn these attacks themselves into ideological supports of private property. (8–9)

Although melodramas are more broadly concerned with moral transgressions than crime as such, Mandel’s reading of the process of “criminalization” of revolts against property presupposing the reification of the social as natural follows Marx’s reading of melodrama as a “spiritualization” of the material needs and motivations of the working

classes, which denies that their agency is determined by the capitalist form of appropriation (exploitation). In their critique of the melodramatic imagination of Eugène Sue and the Left Hegelians in *The Holy Family*, Marx and Engels engaged with the need on the part of the bourgeoisie to construct an “ethical socialism” to contain the emergent revolutionary agency of the proletariat represented by their own “scientific socialism.” They explained how this was done by valorizing popular culture and in the process occluding the material basis of class consciousness in labor relations. Since then, melodrama has been more or less successful in containing class conflicts to the degree to which it has met the needs of the people to consume imaginative representations of their real conditions of life (i.e., provided a use-value under capitalism) while stabilizing exploitation. At times when the class struggle between labor and capital becomes impossible to ignore because of the relative immiseration of workers in relation to the owners and when all aspects of everyday life become implicated in the class struggle, melodrama has been less successful in meeting social needs and seems “irrelevant,” “forced,” “fake,” or “clichéd” (even in its self-consciously “revolutionary” forms, which pale in comparison with the struggle in reality at those times when it has assumed such a role, as during the French Revolution, for example). As capitalism has expanded across the globe to the point that the world has come to seem nothing but “an immense collection of commodities” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, 125), melodrama has more and more been subsumed under capital as well and made to serve the profit motive by being reduced to the status of escapist entertainment, which is to say, as in the words of “The Manifesto of the Communist Party,” reduced to “mere training to act as a machine” (*Reader* 487). The culture industry of contemporary melodramas thus offer “a ludicrous parenthesis in the middle of everyday reality” (Alea 116) in which the subject is imag(in)ed in ways that keep workers available for exploitation by the ruling class.

Between the emergence of neomelodrama as a form of semiotic democracy under neoliberalism during the '80s and the humanist melodrama of the '60s, there was the “anti-melodrama” of the '70s. Under the impact of formalist narratology and (post)structuralist poetics there was practically a complete inversion of the meaning of melodrama in the seventies from its earlier postwar humanist and existentialist articulations. From a “redemptive” aesthetic critique of modern social alienation it became a technically alienated critique (attributed to the spontaneous “gaze” of the cinematic apparatus) of capitalist aesthetics (what Elsaesser calls “liberal idealism”). In the



anti-melodrama discussed by such writers as Elsaesser, the focus is shifted from reading plays and novels to reading film. This shift in focus also displaces the “communal” agency of universal “myth” sought by the modernists for an “auteurist” ideology (in which Sirk and, later, Fassbinder stand as heroes) typical of the cultural avant-garde. What provides the agency of melodrama here is its commodification into a cinema of “sensations,” which is read as the “sublimation of dramatic conflict into décor, colour, gesture and composition of frame” (Elsaesser 76), that renders the ideology of liberal individualism ironic, because while these films, on the one hand, “advocate...that the remedy is to apply more of the same” old affirmative idealism, on the other, they reveal the inadequacy of doing so because of “the very mediocrity of the human beings involved” (89). Whereas classical melodrama was sentimental and nostalgic for a time before the market polarized society into “haves” and “have-nots,” anti-melodrama is post-nostalgic and unapologetic about supporting the ideology of the market as the agency of social change, on the grounds that ideology is subverted through its cynical repetition. It is the “ironic” untimeliness of setting the ideology of “liberal idealism” contained in the melodramatic form in the time of the coercive harmony (“affirmative culture” 89) of the market that makes Elsaesser conclude that (auteurist) melodrama spontaneously constitutes a “devastating critique” of ideology (85). I want to focus on Elsaesser’s text for a moment because of the way it reads like a survey of what have become the familiar moves of the discursivist cultural theory that has displaced knowledge of the class antagonism in melodrama by privileging voluntarism over history and pluralism over critique.

According to Elsaesser, “problems of melodrama” can be reduced to “problems of style” (74): in other words, to aesthetic conventions. He therefore presupposes that its historical changes are not made in connection with the social totality and the materiality of labor, but by an overdetermined succession of merely contingent epistemic breaks in which narrative “modes of experience” fall into ideological crisis by the emergence of newer narrative technologies. Thus, according to him, whereas writers in nineteenth-century Europe “understood the melodrama as a form which carried its own values and already embodied its own significant content” because “it served as the literary equivalent of a particular, historically and socially conditioned *mode of experience*” (74), this is in actuality the result of their, and our own, thinking in “conformity with literary standards of verisimilitude” found in “the novel” whose sheer “size connotes solid

emotional involvement for the reader" (76). "We," on the other hand, because of the dominance of cinema, ordinarily "call something melodramatic" when there

is an exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern in human actions and emotional responses, a from-the-sublime-to-the-ridiculous movement, a fore-shortening of lived time in favour of intensity—all of which produces a graph of much greater fluctuation, a quicker swing from one extreme to the other than is considered natural. (76)

Cinema, according to Elsaesser, has thus made melodrama into "an expressive code . . . a particular form of dramatic mise-en-scène, characterized by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories, as opposed to intellectual or literary ones" (75) that "appeal to the reality of the psyche" (73), characterized by "ignorance of the properly social and political . . . causality [of] social crises" (72). Thus, according to him, Balzac depicts the "Manichean conflicts" of "early capitalist economics" (73) because of a hegemonic literary technology, but in the cinematic melodramas of Sirk, Minnelli, Ray, and Cukor—because of "the fact that commercial necessities, political censorship and the various morality codes restricted directors in what they could tackle as a subject" and therefore "entailed a different awareness of what constituted a worthwhile subject" (77)—"alienation is recognized as a basic condition" (86), and what is shown is "how the economics of the psyche are as vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation as is a person's labour" (88).

Under the affective alibi of an arbitrary change in the *techné* of narrative, because, for example, "*speech* in the American cinema loses some of its semantic importance in favour of its material aspects as sound" (76), Elsaesser claims that "the domestic melodrama in colour and wide screen, as it appeared in the 40s and 50s," represents a formal "sublimation of dramatic conflict into décor, colour, gesture and composition of frame" (76) that manages "to present *all* the characters convincingly as victims" rather than motivated by private interest and personal psychology (86). And thereby it provides "a devastating critique of the ideology which supports" (85) the bourgeois subject. In other words, the auteurism of cinematic melodrama subverts the "exalted vision of man" contained in "the American dream" (89) that personal liberty necessarily leads to the social good. On this reading, what is also subverted, however, is the critique-al subject whose positive knowledge of the objective world is necessary for transformative praxis. Elsaesser's "anti-melodrama"

represents a cynical opportunism in which the general lack of “class consciousness” (Elsaesser 86) is conveniently read as a spontaneous and culturally liberating demoralization: a lack of affect toward meta-narratives that subverts their rule. The displacement of class to morality—which has always been the effect of melodrama—is attributed to changes in technology, but this is in fact simply a new-er twist in an old story about “ethical socialism” (Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*). Elsaesser reproduces class in the superstructure (as differences in values) even as he erases it in the base (where it is a matter of which class produces and which consumes surplus labor). He does so by arguing for melodrama as “a conscious use of style-as-meaning,” as “the very condition of a modernist sensibility working in popular culture” (77) that “privileges the spectator” because it “activates very strongly an audience’s participation, for there is a desire to make up for the emotional deficiency” (88) of the characters in the film. In Elsaesser’s cultural theory, there stand on the one side technically conscious auteurs who know how melodrama is “emotionally exploitative” and who “privilege the spectator” by “giving” them this knowledge for a profit, while on the other side stand the masses with their “ignorance of the properly social and political” (72) changes that have taken place in melodrama and how it is used in exploitative ways, and they are hungry for spectacle. Elsaesser thus provides the social division of labor with a complementary, cooperative, and harmonious façade in the popular need for ideology. Melodrama in this opportunist sense is “the last word and the only seriously meant word of bourgeois socialism. It is summed up in the phrase: the bourgeois is a bourgeois—for the benefit of the working class” (Marx and Engels, *Reader* 497).

By the eighties the cynical criticism of affirmative culture was no longer acceptable, because of its residual critique of liberal ideology. Because of the expansion of capitalism and contraction of socialism in the world, it became normative to think that society had entered a “post-ideological” zone in which what socially mattered was how to manage the new postindustrial “knowledge” economy that was ushering in the “end of history” with the “death of class.” As a result, there emerged a neo-melodrama that returns to the liberal ideology of the subject of the classic melodrama, not in the mode of a universal critique for a utopian society, but as the sovereign consumer, the subject of pleasure celebrated in the later Foucault. This neo-melodrama makes “desire” foundational to the social by dissolving social relations in the performativity of subjectivity. In the process of endlessly reiterating the normative codes and conventions of culture the

subject finds moments of liberation by extracting “pleasure” in the subtle displacement of their normative significance. Neomelodrama is a form of cultural pluralism in which a Rortyeen pragmatics displaces power analysis as tied to structural positions of intelligibility. Neomelodrama, as articulated in Hays and Nikolopoulou’s reading of it as performing the “overdetermined” status of culture, reflects the securing of neoliberalism in the eighties and the deregulation of the State. With the growing class polarization that has taken place under this regime, however, there is a return to a universal concept of ideology as the anchorage of the subject in the social relations, and cultural theory begins to talk about globalization and neoliberalism. With the return of the concept of an ideological social totality, critique becomes a prerequisite for political agency and instrumental in making social change. However, the return, as do all returns, presupposes a debt. And the debt here is marked by the emptying of the concept of ideology as “false consciousness” of class, as in the writings of Althusser, for example, in favor of ideology as therapy to suture the “trauma” of subjectivity—what Žižek calls “the absent center of political ontology,” or Lyotard, “the incredulity toward grand-narratives”—as in the (returning) religious writings of Benjamin, which place the affective as central to the community.

What I am calling (post)melodrama remained dominant in the ’90s and beyond under the crisis of globalization and it returns to neo-marxist writers such as Althusser for a political critique of capitalist hegemony. It accepts the post-al dogma of the pan-insidism of ideology as brought about by the “absent cause” of the proletariat at the center of global capitalism but in such a way as to authorize activist subjects who identify their desire with a utopic social real. Desire is now not simply the pluralized desire of neoliberal ideology motivated by the constitutive lack of social attachment as discursivist cultural theory celebrated in the ’80s but the alienated desire of the Symbolic order itself that makes subjects into bearers of utopian ideals because it totally excludes their feelings. For example, a recent text in *Rethinking Marxism* repeats Derrida’s call for a “hauntology” that “will blow to pieces the stasis of the present and free it from what Benjamin would term the homogenous ‘continuum of history’” (71), as an argument for a “queer politics” manned by “gay incendiaries,” because “what is the messianic in relationship to the contemporary symbolic order if not the death drive?” (Wegner 76). On these terms the subject becomes the figure of an impossible desire for universality that cannot be realized and which thus mobilizes illusions and fantasies as the basis of a renewed popular life. Wegner thus argues that

the blockbuster movie *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) offers “a figure of the revolution itself” in the alien’s “eradication of a worldwide archive of the cultural heritage” (71), because such images “tap into contemporary desires for a radical change of affairs” (72) at a time of “collective inability to do anything that might transform the social, cultural, and political landscape” (67). This text assumes that a “radical” theory of popular culture consists of redescribing its libertarian rhetoric in a “revolutionary” way—as reiterating what it calls “the classical Marxist resistance to the thoroughly utopian idealist project of representing a new social order before its actual material achievement” (69)—and thus attaching to it the significance of a popular “desire” for change without the need of theory. Wegner assumes that what is revolutionary are “marginalized” (?) lifestyles without a future and thereby accepts the volunteerist dogma of bourgeois agency that mystifies collectivity by making change a question of local rearrangements of discourse. Wegner does not seem to realize that what he calls “restoring to Marxism its revolutionary energies” (70) is simply a relay—more and more put forward in religious language in the academy—of what bourgeois economists such as Schumpeter call “creative destruction,” which is deployed in times of overproduction to “bolster consumer confidence,” as the Federal Reserve puts it, that is, to stimulate consumption. To celebrate popular consumption as a revolutionary desire by “reappropriating the discourse” of “pleasure” within class society has nothing to do with Marxism. It is a libertarian practice to “pleasure” the self at the expense of the other. What Wegner’s text proves is how anarchism has become vital to big business in the United State. In other words, as Scott Forsyth recently put it, this is a “strangely elitist brand of populism” (272) that, finding “subversion is everywhere” in popular culture because of its “textuality” (273), has helped define cultural studies as “the rule and triumph of the market” (273) in the academy.

The dominant cultural studies of melodrama today has become the scene of a staged contest between those who extend its meaning so as to cover all forms of representation, making it a meta category synonymous with the decentered real of (post)modernity (e.g., Brooks, Lang, Žižek), and those who locate it more and more specifically within local “regimes of power/knowledge” in which the possibility of knowledge of the social totality is considered to be constitutively lacking (as in Butler and Hays and Nikolopoulou, for example). Like all debates, this one too is staged for the mutual benefit of the participants because of its exclusion of an other (class) position that brings to bear the needs of the global working class against the regime of

profit. Both participants to the official debate presuppose the same matrix of assumptions that forms the contemporary common sense of what Mas'ud Zavarzadeh calls "post-ality": "a regime of class struggle against the workers," (1) which disconnects cultural practices (power relations) from their implication in labor relations (exploitation), thereby giving them an independent basis in knowledge (values).

I am proposing an other reading of cultural practices that will have a significant effect on how melodrama is read. My reading re-situates melodrama as a global mode of intelligibility in the dialectic of social production and class praxis. My argument is within the problematic of cultural studies broadly considered, in so far as it socially situates melodrama within a historical context, but it does not reduce that context to the contingencies of the local (a historicity without the materiality of labor). Rather, my argument implicates the local in the global, but not the global as the "real" locus of subjectivity, a regime of general and generic ideas or meta-narratives competing for symbolic status against others. By global I mean the objective historic class relations of capitalism (mode of production) and its economic laws of motion. My reading therefore goes outside the imag(in)ed debates of the post-al culture industry—the affirmative post-Marxist cultural studies that fetishizes the local and presupposes we live in a post-labor regime based on knowledge (values)—by engaging with popular culture as symptomatic of the necessity of, and need for, class consciousness (knowledge of social totality).

Like all commodities, what I am calling global melodrama (the culture industry of films and theory providing an occult critique of neoliberalism) meets certain general human needs (i.e., has a "use-value") under the specific social and historical conditions imposed by capitalism (production for exchange and profit). To understand what are widely seen as extra-economic cultural practices like melodrama as a commodity, it is first necessary to explain what is capitalism, which is not at all self-evident given the absolute dominance of the bourgeois knowledges.

In the dominant knowledges, capitalism is itself considered post-capitalist by reading the social in terms of "power" (itself taken to be decentered) rather than labor (which is historically determinate). Antonio Negri, for example, evacuates capitalism of its class basis by following Foucault, who reads capitalism as a mode of "governance," a regime of "biopower" that is "nothing less than the entry of life into history, that is the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power

[which] undertook to control and modify them" (*History* 141–2). Foucault provided an alibi for capitalism by marking "the 'right' to life, to one's body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs" (145) as a zone "outside history" (143) because life itself had become a "political object" (145) of techno-science. On such a reading, it is knowledge, not labor, that becomes central to the social. "Knowledge" is what Negri calls "immaterial" or "emotional labor," which he places in the center of capitalism. Emotional labor represents for him the "real communism" of the "immaterial, abstract, cooperative characteristics of social work" ("Later Althusser" 60) that he reads as "autonomous" of the logic of capital and which makes existing society postcapitalist already so that revolution is not necessary (Negri and Hardt, *Empire*). Capitalism is thus rejected as an object of analysis because such a global theory privileges the economic as basic to the social and therefore repeats what is considered to be the basic function of what Negri elsewhere calls "constituted power" (*Savage Anomaly*), which is to marginalize alternative social practices. Capitalism is thus diffused throughout the social as a logic ("constituted power") that by definition must always disavow its own performance of power in "fixing" the social real. The object of Foucauldian power analysis is to block a class theoretics of the social and present the new as lying in the localities of the system. Thus, post-Marxists such as Foucault call capitalism the regime of "biopower," Deleuze and Guattari talk about "territoriality" and "coding," and Gibson-Graham reject capitalism as "capito-centrism" and valorize local pragmatics and marginal economies. Capitalism is explained away on these readings as a mode of production of material life by being made into an overdetermined political order without a center, following Althusser. Capitalism is therefore always already postcapitalist because it depends for its stability, as an overdetermined social formation, on the hegemonic articulation of different economic practices not necessarily tied to wage-labor, which the transnational left rejects as central to the social by rejecting the orthodoxy (as fixed ideas) of Marxist "economism." Capitalism is thus understood as a constitutively "out of joint" (Derrida, *Specters of Marx*) social formation that has hegemonized the social and marginalized alternative economic practices that exceed the logic of capital explained by classical Marxism. It is by re-signifying marginal economic practices into the primary constitutive of capitalism against the orthodox Marxist reading of them as secondary to class exploitation that the transnational left expects a "coming community" (Agamben, *The Coming Community*) will be brought about.

In actuality, capitalism is still basically capitalism—and this explains the emergence of the purely superstructural readings of capitalism as a discursive regime held in place by fixed ideas—because of the basic expropriation of labor power from wage workers. All anticapitalist theories that foresee social change being brought about without the abolition of exploitation in the base are in fact sentimental morality tales masquerading as critiques of capitalism (which is what makes “emotional labor” so useful as the imag(in)ed social relations of global melodrama). Capitalism, as classical Marxism explains, is the global mode of social production in which labor has been transformed into a commodity by the total separation of the worker from the means of production. The result of this global expropriation is the class binary (that taboo term of mainstream theory) between exploiters and exploited because it forces those who have only their labor-power to sell to work for those who own the means of production and to produce profit for them or else starve. It is this systematic exploitation of labor that makes capitalism *capitalism*, not its maintenance of oppressive regimes of labor outside the logic of capital.

The forms of oppression thought to exceed the logic of capital on the transnational left are in actuality part of capitalism and not “autonomous” of it. Their existence testifies to the degree to which capitalism has “rationalized” productive labor. Oppression (extra-economic coercion) is a *secondary* contradiction of capitalism, because it is an effect of capitalism’s uneven development. This uneven development is the contradiction between the advanced sectors of capitalism, based on free labor markets, coming into conflict with, first, precapitalist social relations (e.g., communal, feudal) based on “unfree labor” or “extra-economic” coercion, and, second, a mode of capitalism in which labor has only formally rather than actually been subsumed under capitalism; that is, a stage in the development of the capitalist mode of production before scientific mastery of the production process has been instituted and the only way to generate surplus value was through the extraction of absolute surplus value (by lengthening the working day, for example, or cutting wages directly). However, as soon as capitalism organized itself historically into monopoly capitalism, modes of production based on extra-economic coercion were bound to disappear. The “extra-economic” forms of exploitation in the world today are residual of an older capitalism that has been displaced from the center of the social by more productive forms of labor. In other words, they are not outside capitalism or residual of precapitalist forms of appropriation based on extra-economic forms of coercion but marginal forms of capitalism itself based on the exploitation



of labor at the center. The cultural and real violence done to women, people of color, and lesbian/gay people, in other words, stems from the persistence of the economic exploitation of the working class central to capitalism and is not an independent political domination held in place by separate patriarchal, homophobic, Eurocentric regimes of fixed ideas demanding their own special theory of change, as identity politics maintains. By disarticulating the totality of production practices the cultural left authorizes capitalism without gender, race, discrimination, and thus accepts economic inequality as an integral part of human societies. For them capitalism is here to stay, and the best that can be done is to make its cruelties more tolerable, more humane. This humanization (not eradication) of capitalism is the sole goal of all contemporary lefts (marxism, feminism, antiracism, queerries, and so on) as well as the imag(in)ed real of global melodrama. Global melodrama is what I call the cultural process whereby social relations are reified into dramatic representations of crisis and conflict and turned into “indirect apologetics” (Lukács, *Destruction of Reason*) for late (“moribund,” Lenin) capitalism. The fact that this process of cultural reification has become systemic and thus conscious testifies to the very real material possibility of transforming culture to serve human needs.

*The Butcher Boy* (Neil Jordan, 1997) provides an occasion to investigate a contemporary melodramatic text as popular culture for global capitalism. On the surface it appears to be the (conventionally melodramatic) life-story of Francie Brady (as told by himself, in recollection), a young working-class boy living in a small town in Ireland at the height of the cold war who, under the impact of a dysfunctional family situation and the death of his parents, becomes a delinquent and is institutionalized. However, it is the “excessive” tale of the film that shatters conventional narrative coherence and imag(in)es the subject in the autonomy of the affective for global capitalism that makes the text (post)melodramatic in the activist sense, which I have argued above is central to the global melodrama of today.

As the film unfolds, Francie is shown to be a split-subject who is subject to a paranoid fantasy that leads him to brutally murder a petty-bourgeois woman of the town, Mrs. Nugent, under the delusion that she is the “alien” cause of the loss of his childhood happiness with his “blood-brother” Joe Purcell. In the first scene—which, as is later revealed, takes place in the “garage,” the place where people who “break down” go (i.e., the local mental institution)—young Francie, in answer to the melodramatic question, “Why Francie, why you’d

have broken your poor mother's heart?" explains (as his older self, in voice-over narration) that

When I was a young lad 20 or 30 or 40 years ago, I lived in a small town where they were all after me on account of what I done on Mrs. Nugent. If she hadn't poked her nose in between me and Joe everything would have been all right. Of all the wrong things I'd done I suppose the apples were the first. They started all the trouble. And Francie Brady didn't need any old snake to give him one. He robbed them himself.

The film will systematically disrupt this origin story of paradise lost by revealing the fantasmatic basis of the subject of the narrative, which is not Francie Brady the socially "victimized" boy who is shown bandaged from head to toe in the "garage," but the older Francie Brady narrating the story who, after having realized that he is the "snake" that "robbed . . . himself" of paradise, we later learn, is finally being released from the mental institution into what his doctor tells him is "the real world" where it was about time he "joined." The film depicts a split in Francis Brady's personality—between a "heroic" self-determining character (that the film-text marks as "Mr. Francie Brady"; "The Incredible Francie Brady" who, like "The Great Algernon Cruthers," "travels through the wastes of space and time"; "Al Capone"; "Francie-Brady-The-Butcher-Boy"), and Francie Brady, the neglected and despised boy who becomes the "reformed" narrator of the story as in a more conventional melodramatic tradition. The film rehearses the narrative that Francie's self-alienation is the result of traumatic experiences of abuse, neglect, and abandonment by his mentally ill mother and alcoholic father in colonized Ireland during the '50s. Because of the flashback narration, however, the tale is unreliable not only because it includes impossible delusional elements (e.g., the persecution fantasy of Mrs. Nugent), but also because in the process of narration itself the older Francie actively participates in the re-narrated action as young Francie's spectral interlocutor (as, for example, in the scene where young Francie vandalizes the Nugent house under the "instruction" of the older Francie in the voice-over). This decentered subjectivity is an index of the "structure of feeling" that the film foregrounds and is tied in the narrative to the replacement of "the family" (the traditional structure for the private reproduction of socially necessary labor under capitalism based on heredity) with "the friend" (the commodified private sphere of reproduction under cyber-capitalism that even more

leaves up to the individual the private reproduction of labor-power). Through these moves and displacements the film argues that people are basically “free” to “make” themselves what they are and should not be artificially limited by traditional social institutions and conventions. The connection of the free subject and commodification is clear in the film because Francie’s and Joe’s voluntary association as “blood brothers,” as well as its fantasmatic support as a protection against the alienating effects of Mrs. Nugent, is modeled on the latest export products of the emerging postwar metropole: cold war television, comics, film noir, and science fiction. Mrs. Nugent represents a global threat of annihilation in the film as in Francie’s fantasy she is synonymous with a “Cuban-Communist-alien” invasion that destroys the world “as we know it.” The destruction of the world “as we know it” is the precondition for a utopian aesthetic of “hope” later in the film, which frames the narrative as a movement from the sublime to the beautiful that parallels Francie’s feelings of attachment to and detachment from the social.

The (post)melodramatic text of the film does not consist of the “story” or its “context,” but in what Althusser called its “dynamic and latent structure” (“Piccolo Teatro”) and in how its contradictions lead to “the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life.” This is the post-al subject of the “post-ideological” moment—one who has left behind both the narcissistic status of “innocent victim” with its constitutive ignorance of “personal responsibility,” as well as the reformed “voice” of the “real world,” who assumes control of the narrative and rewrites his own life over the suppressed voice of his youth. It is this post-al subject that provides the activist with the alibi that what matters is knowledge (of textuality, of affectivity, and so on), rather than the extratextual real of class, that is needed by contemporary cyber-capitalism. The post-al subject is imag(in)ed in the narrative of *The Butcher Boy* by its systematically representing a world divided in two, the cause of which is constitutively absent because of the “traumatic” kernel of subjectivity at the basis of the social real. By placing the origin story of the film in the mouth of a split subjectivity *The Butcher Boy* argues that the social totality is in actuality a performative construct that yet remains unchanging in its essence, rather than an effect of class society open to change. As in Žižek, this construct serves the post-al ideology by arguing that

externalization of the cause into “social conditions” [the patriarchal family, its role in the totality of the reproduction of the capitalist

system, and so on] is . . . false, in so far as it enables the subject to avoid confronting the real of his or her desire. (*Mapping* 6)

In other words, the object of the (post)melodramatic text is to disrupt a causal explanation of the global division of labor on moral grounds—because to do so “discharge[s] us of responsibility for it” (Žižek, *Mapping* 30). That this is not seen as a return to liberal ideology of the subject is due to the increased commodification and pluralization of symbolic commitments in cyber-capitalism that the film references and performs in the context of colonial Ireland in the ’50s. The return to the “personal” as constitutive of the political is considered enabling because it positions the subject in the market for a politics, thereby “refusing” to accept a socially fixed form of politics under the alibi that fixed ideas are “hegemonic” (what Negri calls “constituted power”) while flexible ideas are “subversive” or “constitutive power” (*Savage Anomaly*, Preface). The resulting display of lifestyle as politics goes along with the commodification of the real that characterizes globalization. Change becomes a matter of pietistic belief, choosing the metaphysics that chooses you, as in the contemporary neo-marxist writings that model themselves on messianic theology. This flexi-theology serves to naturalize the global market as a post-class social real constituted by ideas.

*The Butcher Boy* performs the reversal of causality not only by making the subject of the narrative an unreliable source but also by building up tension in the narrative between a series of absolute binary oppositions the global logic of which is itself arbitrary. This is because, as one of the town women says to Francie, “the problem is you just don’t know who you’re dealing with” anymore from one moment to the next. Although she is referring to the communists in their struggle against U.S. imperialism over the installation of nuclear missiles in Cuba, later in the film her statement is repeated in a dream sequence of Francie’s in such a way as to give it the global meaning that the “time is out of joint” and it is up to the subject to “make it right” (Derrida, *Specters of Marx*). Significantly, in this scene Francie is sedated and dreaming that the “Communists-aliens-Mrs. Nugent” have finally dropped the bomb and annihilated the town. As he and Joe walk amidst the rubble and view the corpses of the town’s people, who are pigs in the fantasy, phrases from the past, such as the one from the woman in town, are repeated. On “hearing” in the dream “the problem is you just don’t know who you’re dealing with” again, however, Francie replies to the woman/dead pig, “So who’s the pig now ladies?” And in this way he appropriates the social trauma of

“not knowing” who “they are” into his own personal narrative. In Francie’s fantasy the feared other is not only known and annihilated but known because they are annihilated in Francie’s personal fantasy. In other words, the materiality of the “other” is inverted: it is not an effect of the class binary (what the film codes as American/communist) but a matter of value coding (margin/center) that is contingent on merely subjective belief systems. The scene thus stages the (post)melodramatic logic of global capitalism by making the subject and his affective desire the cause of the social, rather than the reverse.

In order to displace global knowledge of the social cause of the contradictions, the (post)melodramatic text must segregate the social into a field of plural flexi-attachments ruled by an occasionalist knowledge of “desire.” In this way it produces an opportunist subject who rejects “taking sides” as an unnecessary imposition on the pleasures to be found in refashioning and re-narrating the social contradictions on an *ad hoc* basis. Such a subject, of course, does take sides by displacing class contradiction into merely local differences and thus making knowledge (values) central to the social and not labor (praxis). In other words, it is a subject who supports the bourgeois culturalist ideology that change only happens in the superstructure and not in the base. In *The Butcher Boy* there is a series of binary oppositions: the Kennedys (i.e., Irish-American elites whose portraits are ubiquitously placed next to the religious icon of “Our Lady”) and the communists (“Krushev bastard”); England (source of Mrs. Nugent’s “airs and graces” with which she “walked all around the place as if she owned the town” and where Uncle Alo has employment with “10 men under ‘im”) and “the town” (a “big garage” and “pig pen” where Francie’s father is an underemployed alcoholic horn player); the town (where Francie has “adventures” that provide him with knowledge of mass psychology he uses to mimic the State by “inventing” a “pig poll tax” with which to intimidate Mrs. Nugent on her walks and to teach the “bog-men” how to follow and protect him in his identity of “Al Capone”) and country (land of follow-the-leader “bog-men” who all “dance like wading through manure” because of their “ass in the air and nose to the ground” mentality); the Catholic “home” for juvenile delinquents (“the house with a hundred windows just like the one Da and Alo spent all those happy days”) and “home” (where “Ma” the “bun woman” who acts like a “cake machine” is abused by “Da” who treats her “like a pig” and is most of the time passed out and whom Francie comes to see as “Mr. and Mrs. Monkey”); the “garage” (the place where the locals go who “break down”) and the church (a place filled with “bog-men who

think they're at a football game" through which Francie must go to get the "Francie-Brady-Not-A-Bad-Bastard-Award"); the "old town" (before the death of Francie's parents that he compares to "a great big ocean liner lying at the bottom of the ocean") and the carnivalesque "new town" (that was "rising up getting ready to sail anywhere you wanted to go" and that "looked like the brightest and happiest town in the whole world" because it was putting on "the end-of-the-world-show" in which everybody is "holy-ing out" with a "we're all in this together" spirit because of the fear of nuclear annihilation); and finally the "real world" (filled with all these contradictions) and the "alien world" (the narrative in which "communists-aliens-Mrs. Nugent" are out to destroy "all the beautiful things," especially the "blood brotherhood" between Francie and Joe).

The subject that the (post)melodramatic text valorizes by imagining the world in localities is one whose emotionally intense experiences serve as the source of an "inventive" imagination that symbolically competes with the hegemonic grand-narratives of established institutions and conventions and in the process reveals them to be themselves performances anchored in desire. The film in fact offers a tour of these normative institutions in Francie's "travels through the wastes" of Irish colonial society that reveals them to be, like the town as a whole according to Joe, "cracked," that is, unable to secure consent. They are shown in this way because they are unable to contain the spontaneous "dissensus" Francie introduces into them, not as a free subject who "naturally" rebels against their authority because they are unjust and who thereby supports the principle of individual "sovereignty" underlying that authority, but as a subject of surplus desire who overidentifies himself with public figures of authority in order to himself become the object of popular desire and who therefore represents the "illogic" of desire standing in for social authority. For example, take the way Francie assumes the role of the "pig toll tax" collector, a "business," as he tells the women of the town who gossip in the general store, he "invented" in order to "prove" to them that Mrs. Nugent is a public nuisance because she refuses to pay it. Another example would be when in the Catholic home for delinquent boys Francie first becomes an altar boy so as to get the "Francie-Brady-Not-A-Bad-Bastard-Award" so that he can more quickly be released and be "right at the foot of the fountain again with Joe Purcell, KING OF ALL TIME" and then pretends to have visions of "Our Lady" because the priests tell the boys stories like this as proof that "she knew that the soul of a child is purest of all." The universal desire for transcendence that constitutes the social

in *The Butcher Boy* is called “the beautiful,” and it is associated with the end of the social (as class antagonism). It is symbolized in the final scene when Francie learns to accept the fact that “the world goes one way and we go another” and thereby abandons his passionate attachment to (his Christ like ideal of) Joe and in return is given a “beautiful” snowdrop flower by “Our Lady” on entry into the “real world”—the same flower that rained as fallout from the nuclear blast that annihilated the town in his fantasy. The movement from the sublime (end-of-the-world nuclear holocaust) to the beautiful (enter-the-world single flower) parallels the movement from the dead family (“Mr. And Mrs. Monkey”) to performative family (“blood brother”) and from lost blood brother to entry into the “real world.” The “real world” is thus a place beyond social struggle or solidarity, a place of pure aesthetic “hope” in the subject to be “inventive” and take care of himself. This is the socially necessary subject of global capitalism that (post)melodrama must perform if it is going to be effective (“popular”) in containing contemporary social contradictions.

### IMMATERIAL APOLOGETICS

Contemporary cultural studies has practically become obsessed with what it calls the “economic” in ways that challenge the prior reign of discourse theory. In new books such as *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory* (Hall, 2007), *Marxism, Modernity and Postcolonial Studies* (Bartolovich and Lazarus, 2008), *Commonwealth* (Negri and Hardt, 2009), and *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (Žižek, 2009), for example, there is an increasing call for cultural studies to return to its “roots” in discussions of capitalism and inequality. The recent turn to the economic in contemporary cultural theory contests the reification of the social in terms of discourse. This economic turn has, however, both a rhetorical mode, represented above by writers such as Grossberg who yet continue to assert that “economics is itself a discourse” (“Speculations” 17), and a more serious mode that returns to Marxist concepts of the social totality in order to investigate the materiality of culture, in the texts of neo-marxist writers such as Fredric Jameson and Antonio Negri, for example. In the neo-marxist cultural theory, however, social relations are dematerialized as symbolic production. Relying on Althusser’s revision of base/superstructure, Negri and Jameson argue that the root of the contemporary social formation is “immaterial” and unavailable as a basis for transformative materialist critique because it has become primarily symbolic. In order to articulate the classical Marxist labor

theory of culture today it is therefore necessary to look at the contemporary cultural theories that put themselves forward as materialist critiques of the dominant cultural theory of immanence.

In "The Specter's Smile," for example, Negri uses Derrida's *Specters of Marx* to show how the spectral materialism put forward there remains immersed in "the phenomenology of capitalist production" (7) in a way that "corresponds with common experience" (9) and that fails to describe its "ontological" basis, the "new productive reality" (9) of the laboring subject whose experience it is. Because Derrida ignores the fact that "human labor, both mental and manual, is increasingly implicated in exploitation" (11), he is thus "a prisoner of the ontology he critiques" (13). Negri thus explicitly re-privileges ontology in ways that Derrida rejected as classically idealist (Platonism) on the grounds that the hierarchy between writing and reality authorized by this binary subordinates conceptuality to the general cultural economy. But Derrida's textualism itself reinscribes the dominant ideology in which culture is understood immanently and fails to investigate the conflict in ontology that reflects antagonistic class interests. Ontology has always maintained that being determines consciousness, but it has also been the site of a disagreement about the organization of being: whether being is a static and inert category as in mechanical materialist theories of nature or whether it is historical and changes according to knowable laws, as in dialectical materialism. Negri's position, in so far as according to him labor has become primarily "immaterial" and "directly produces social relationships and forms of life" (*Multitude* 110), must be seen as a speculative ontology that posits "'society as the subject'" (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 59) and regards the "interrelated individuals . . . as a single individual, which accomplishes the mystery of generating itself" (59). Negri maintains that labor is the central organizing factor of the contemporary, but his concept of labor is so general ("creative capacities" *Multitude* 105) that it effectively becomes a trope of experience, which is what he means by ontology ("a common experience," "Specter's Smile" 9).

While prioritizing concepts central to a materialist theory of culture, such as labor, production, exploitation, and revolution, Negri evacuates them of their historical and material basis in the capitalist mode of production, however, by maintaining that in the contemporary "the law of value no longer works in describing the entire process of capital" (10). Thus, while, on the one hand, exploitation is global, according to Negri—and explains the "spectral" logic of the discursivist cultural theory, which Derrida claims exceeds all (mimeto)logics, as in fact miming the logic of capital—on the other hand, exploitation no longer



concerns the extraction of surplus value from labor, as Marx explained the source of profit. "Accumulation nowadays," Negri claims, consists of "fixing hierarchal and expropriative dividing lines" in the "acquisition of knowledge and social activity taking place within . . . communicative horizons" (11) such as "the Internet" (11). Negri thus displaces a theory of material exploitation with an analytics of cultural domination on the grounds that labor has become "immaterial" and primarily cultural. In his bestseller *Empire* (written with Michael Hardt), he occults any structure of necessity behind labor by treating labor as a trope of desire, describing it as "a horizon of activities, resistances, wills, and desires that refuse the hegemonic order, propose lines of flight and forge alternative constitutive itineraries" (48). While claiming that "immaterial labor" constitutes a voluntary "refusal" of the hegemonic order, Negri also makes it a "figure of labor that exerts hegemony" over all other kinds of labor (*Multitude* 107) such that service work—"labor that produces or manipulates affects" (108)—is made the model of labor globally. In this way Negri's labor theory reifies global labor by reducing it to the form of labor located in the West, which no longer produces anything at a time when productive labor (i.e., profitable investment) has shifted elsewhere (China, India, etc.). His theory takes the lack of investment in labor in the West as a voluntary refusal of labor that liberates it from the rule of capital; and because this nonproductive labor is the global model of labor for Negri, labor is understood in a purely subjective way such that "even when labor is subjugated by capital it always necessarily maintains its own autonomy" (*Multitude* 54).

For all his criticism of Derridean spectrality, Negri basically agrees that "there's no longer an outside" ("Specter's Smile" 9) to capitalism and "no longer a measuring gauge of value" (8) upon which to base an emancipatory critique of it. His criticisms of the spectral are thus themselves spectral. They are no more than semantic differences in a merely cultural war, what he calls "the new class wars that define [the] exploitation of labor in a world of immateriality and spectral production" (11). The phrase "new class wars" indicates that the base of the social is not up for contestation, which is why Negri displaces social theory of the contemporary for "ontology"—"a common experience of spectrality as clear as the sun" (9), which takes as a given that Marxism is "out of date" (10) because "no reasonable person could . . . affirm exploitation's identical form then and now" (10). Negri argues for implicating Derrida's spectral concepts in "productive reality" only to end up appealing to the self-evidence of experience as the limit text of the "reasonable." But "reason" is not independent of class interest.

To assert as “unreasonable” the materialist theory of exploitation as based on the expropriation of surplus labor in production, on the grounds that production is an “affective” experience in which “despite the myriad mechanisms of hierarchy and subordination” (*Multitude* 129) workers feel “extraordinarily wealthy” (131) in spirit, is to take the side of the owners who find “reasonable” whatever maintains and justifies the source of their wealth. To claim that “common experience” provides the truth of the contemporary and the non-truth of the law of value is simply to take the continued existence of capitalism for granted and turn it from something historical to something eternal. It is also to dissolve the necessity of theory in general and put thick description in its place as in a rather traditional empiricism. But as Marx argues: “all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided” (*Capital* Vol. III, 804). “Immaterial labor” is a cultural theory that has emerged to reconcile the contradiction between the social production and private appropriation of wealth, which argues that class society need not be transformed because labor already has the power to create reality and the given reality has already superseded exploitation. Such a theory is necessary to explain away the need for revolution at a time of growing social inequality on a world scale.

Negri’s understanding of the contemporary is purely cultural, despite the language of Marxism he uses, because he ignores the material measure of value—profit. Negri has of course become a celebrated figure in the culture industry (by the *New York Times* and the *Charlie Rose* show, for example) for his coauthored bestseller *Empire*, which argues that “imperialism is over” (xiv) and has been replaced by “empire,” a social formation that lies beyond “the fiction of any measure of the working day” (402). But, if the workday is a fiction, then there would be no more profit. Profit is the measure of the working day Negri claims no longer exists. Profit comes from surplus labor, that labor expended in the workday over and above the necessary labor expended by the worker to meet her needs, as Marx explains (“The Working Day” Book I, chap. 10, *Capital* Vol. I, 340–416). Profit can only be materially explained as coming from the basically unequal relations of production in capitalism. It is capitalism that has monopolized the productive forces of society into a few hands and dispossessed the many of everything but their labor power to sell. Without Marx’s labor theory of value there can be no basic contestation of capitalism, only moral condemnation of its more oppressive effects that keeps exploitation intact by immunizing it from materialist critique. Thus, in place of an understanding of labor as a historical

structure of conflicts that reveals “the real movement that abolishes the present state of things” (*German Ideology* 57) and that thus inaugurates the necessity of communism for Marx and Engels, Negri gives a “parable of change” (“The Specter’s Smile” 12) that finds communism ready-made in “the rupture with memory” (14) demanded by the “mobile and flexible reality” of (12) spectral production and says good-bye to the working class as the agent of history.

In place of a materialist theory of social change, Negri tells stories about the potential for spontaneous rebellion due to newer technologies. What defines contemporary exploitation now, according to Negri, is not labor in the classical Marxist sense, but the “body” (“The Specter’s Smile” 13): the “experience” of high-tech work today. Negri claims that contemporary capitalism has brought into being “a common experience of spectrality” (9) in the lives of “a laboring subject amassed in intellectuality and cooperative force” (12). The “new social force of mass intellectuality” (15), he claims, produces a subject at home in the body, who therefore “refuses transcendence and chooses to live a worldly, laic [secular] and rational ascesis [self-discipline] that will lead him towards a constitutive hermeneutics and an ethics of liberation” (11–2), or, in other words, the “new theory of revolution” (14) that Negri calls “communism” (14). Negri’s communism, however, has nothing material to say against exploitation because it is a “rupture with memory” (14). On the one hand, exploitation is real, according to Negri, because

we have communication and the wealth that accumulates therein; on the other, we have the solitude, the misery, the sadness, the exodus and the new class wars that define this exploitation of labor in a world of immateriality and spectral production. (11)

But emotions, in these terms, give the truth of the world (not the social relations of production) and exploitation is made a matter of moral sentiments (not labor). Morality, however, is not autonomous of class but an expression of class. The morality of the ruling class is an eclectic blend of “timeless” axioms that provide an imaginary compensation for inequality and pragmatic codes that go along to get along in the system while deflecting attention from the underlying social relations. Negri’s opposition to inequality is not based on a material foundation that will lead to changing it, but a sentimental one that distracts attention from what is to be done to change it. His theory of change is basically religious: to “revalue” poverty (“the poor are not merely victims but also powerful agents,” *Multitude*

129). But poverty is not caused by moral ostracism. Its cause is profit. Actually, it is because Negri's cultural theory is so invested in making hi-tech service-work in the West the model of all labor, because it is "creative," that his texts are so caught up in trying to "revalue" the labor of the other.

But even in such moral terms, exploitation is a thing of the past for Negri because the "common experience" of the contemporary that "deem[s] the Marxist ontology out of date" ("The Specter's Smile" 10) is that "no longer are capitalist relations of production exercised solely on a subject characterized through misery" (12). The "common experience" of the contemporary that Negri speaks for is that of a post-exploitative "dual state of mind" (11) that "lead[s] the mind to grasp the very nature of Desire, beyond the (past) determinations of existence or the (present) external dialectic of sadness and joy" (11). "Passion" thus figures in his imaginary as "destructive of the world of capital and constructive of freedom" (15) more so than historical materialist theory that uncovers the unmet needs of the majority and brings it to bear upon the ideological. Through the trope of "immaterial" and "affective" labor as constitutive of the contemporary real, Negri first displaces concepts that explain the contemporary in terms of conflicts over the ratio of exploitation demanded by the workday with sentimental categories, and then, in a second move, he injects into this emotional plenitude a voluntarist rebelliousness that morally transcends both the affirmation (joy) and negation (sadness) of the existing world in the "constituent spirit of the ontological violence of transformation" (15). Again, as in idealist theories, it is spirit (passion) that moves the world, not labor.

For a more materialist cultural theory of the contemporary, one has to turn to the writings of Fredric Jameson to understand how the utopian "passion" of a cultural transcendence of labor relations is specifically tied to the capitalist mode of production. This is because central to Jameson's writings is Marx's concept of "commodity fetishism," which he understands primarily through Lukács' theory of "reification"—the material process of production whereby social relations are depersonalized and seen as relations between things and ideas due to the dominance of exchange-value (production for profit). In his *Grundrisse* Marx theorized that the technical and naturalistic ways of discussing labor in classical political economy was a symptom of the real practical indifference toward individual labors in capitalism, which reflects the concrete social whole in an ideological way (104). Following Marx, Jameson argues that any conception of the autonomous separation of culture from the economic is "a symptom

and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life" (20) due to the "universal commodification of labor power" (*Political Unconscious* 66):

Such a distinction reconfirms that structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the "individual," which—the tendential law of social life under capitalism—maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself. . . . To imagine that, sheltered from the omnipresence of history and the implacable influence of the social, there already exists a realm of freedom . . . is only to strengthen the grip of Necessity over all such blind zones in which the individual seeks refuge, in pursuit of a purely individual, a merely psychological, project of salvation. (20)

Culture, in short, is ideological, as "the production of aesthetic or narrative form" has "the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (79), thus "strengthening the grip of Necessity" in culture. It is in "detecting the traces of this uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history," (20) that Jameson understands the goal of a materialist cultural theory as participating in labor, "the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity" (19), citing Marx. Thus, Jameson is in a position to implicate Negri's story of communism as a new "passion" brought about by technical changes impacting the working body as itself a commodification of the senses necessitated by private property, in a manner similar to the way he reads Conrad's "impressionistic" style, for example, which attempts "to rewrite in terms of the aesthetic, of sense perception . . . a reality you prefer not to conceptualize" (215). In these terms, Jameson's use of commodity fetishism would seem to show that far from being a site of resistance to capital, the "senses" are an extension of exploitative relations: the site of ideology. This is significant because he thus establishes the need to read culture and cultural experience (the "senses") not in their own terms but in relation to their outside, namely, the commodity relations that both necessitate such experiences and provide "ready-made" interpretations that justify existing unequal relations. He shows, in short, that the senses, experience, passion, and so on are not explainable on their own terms (since they are produced under certain circumstances) but require explanation (concepts).

Jameson, however, seems to (both in his early and later work) simultaneously undermine this very conclusion in ultimately arguing against the ability to conceptualize economic relations and in suggesting that culture (contrary to what he has already critiqued) should be seen as not only “semi-autonomous” from class relations but also as a (immediate) site of libidinal resistance to class inequality. For instance, he ultimately rejects a materialist theory of ideology, which argues that “superstructural phenomena, are mere reflexes, epiphenomenal projections of infrastructural realities” (*Political Unconscious* 42), on the grounds that “history... is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization” (35). There is, in other words, no outside to ideology, according to Jameson. By getting rid of the outside, Jameson is here duplicating culturalism. The effects of this capitulation to culturalism in Jameson’s social theory has been devastating. In his “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” for instance, he argues for a theory of the “world capitalist system” (68) as constituted by “two cultural logics” (85) that “overdetermine each other” (73) and that displaces a political economic understanding of the global inequality between imperialist countries and their colonies with the banality that a “different ratio of the political to the personal” (69) is evident and the “controlling forces are... difficult to represent” (81). On these terms, “psychology, or more specifically, libidinal investment, is to be read in primarily political and social terms” (72) in countries that have suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism, whose culture, as a result, “must be situational and materialist despite itself” (85) such that the personal is political. At the same time, the culture of imperialist nations is considered “bereft of any possibility of grasping the social totality” (85), and “sexuality and politics might be in homology to each other” (73) such that the personal functions as the political. Jameson’s discourse on “national allegory” is itself a class allegory in which class is re-narrated as “culture,” and instead of an economically integrated world internally divided between exploiters and exploited, the world is composed of “two cultural logics” that program radically different subjectivities and that remain essentially alien to each other. And from this there can only be extracted a pious wish that they may be united someday in a “future utopia” of “collective cooperation” (81), while in the meantime it serves to remind the Western consumers of the third-world text about the “optional nature” (79) of culture and identity. By shifting attention from the basic conditions that establish the relation between imperialist and

imperialized nations onto superstructural features of culture and subjectivity, Jameson aestheticizes the political and underwrites the commodification of the third world, which is what actually drives imperialism.

For a materialist cultural studies, the other of ideology is not some radical identity elsewhere, but the positive knowledge (science) of the real motive forces compelling individuals as they (re)produce their material life under specific historical circumstances. On Jameson's culturalist terms it is impossible to give a critique of ideology as a false-consciousness of the economic and produce an awareness of the necessity for social change. Because Jameson abandons the critique of ideology, he speculates that beyond the historical specification of ideology as global commodification that acts as a "containment" of the awareness of the historicity of labor in capitalism, culture also provides the individual with a therapeutic "compensation" for a thoroughly commodified social life in the form of the "libidinal transformation" (*Political Unconscious* 237) of the senses:

We stressed the semi-autonomy of the fragmented senses, the new autonomy and intrinsic logic of their henceforth abstract objects such as color and pure sound; but it is precisely this new semi-autonomy and the presence of these waste products of capitalist rationalization that opens up a life space in which the opposite and the negation of such rationalization can be, at least imaginatively, experienced. The increasing abstraction of visual art thus proves not only to express the abstraction of daily life and to presuppose fragmentation and reification; it also constitutes a Utopian compensation for everything lost in the process of the development of capitalism—the place of quality in an increasingly quantified world, the place of the archaic and of feeling amid the desacralization of the market system, the place of sheer color and intensity within the grayness of measurable extension and geometrical abstraction. The perceptual is in this sense a historically new experience, which has no equivalent in older kinds of social life. (236–7)

What Jameson is calling a utopian compensation for alienation in the experiential immediacy of the senses is really a sign of his own capitulation to the "prior textualization" of the economic imposed by the culture industry that makes imperative the folding in of culture on itself so as to bolster consumption and marginalize an awareness of culture as an arena of class struggle. In his later writings, such as *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson goes further in arguing that "the infrastructural . . . is necessarily itself

already cultural” (xv), as postmodern theory claims. Consequently, he argues that contemporary “experience” itself can be considered a “supreme act of nomination” that “wields a material impact and, like lightning striking from the superstructure back to the base, fuses its unlikely materials” (xiii) into new hybrid shapes that, therefore, cannot be explained in terms of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production. Jameson, to put this differently, substitutes the immediacy of a compensatory sensuality (culture) for critique (knowledge of the social totality), which, as Marx argues, is necessary to intervene in the workings of ideology from the outside so as to end the regime of necessity imposed by capital.

As Jameson himself realizes, the cultural production of the senses has an economic function through which men and women “are culturally and psychologically retrained for life in the market system” (*Political Unconscious* 236). Culture under capitalism, in short, is “mere training to act as a machine” (Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” 501). There is nothing more impersonal and machinelike than the idea of culture as a privately “sensual” and “experiential” matter free of the logic of capital in the world of global production and the massive unmet need produced by capital. Furthermore, the “place” where Jameson locates culture, at the site of consumption and in the immediacy of the senses, actually contradicts his own understanding of the prior textualization, or cultural work, behind the sense-perception of the world.

When one implicates this cultural work in the wider division of labor, it becomes possible to see that the senses are not the site of an immediacy but the site of class conflict in which immediacy serves as an ideological mystification of the historical production of the senses. Take the work of Matthew Barney, for example, which is read as a new way of seeing art in the new millennium; the *New York Times* has labeled Barney “the most important American artist of his generation” and celebrated his work as heralding a “new freedom” for “art in the new century” (Kimmelman). The reason for such praise is that his work is taken to be beyond ideology, or, as the *Times* critic puts it, it is “Free To Play and Be Gooey.” Barney’s art is taken to be beyond ideology in the mainstream commentary because of its multimedia complexity, from Vaseline and self-lubricating plastic to tapiooca, precious metals, sculpture, drawing, and film, and because of its cross-cultural references to Masonry, Irish nationalism, pop culture, and high art, for example, and the way such complexity of means disrupts its narrative coherence, which seems to eschew any decided content or closure (the *Cremaster Cycle* is about the failure of gender



differentiation and identity). The *Cremaster Cycle* represents a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) that installs a new modality of seeing that exemplifies Jameson's diagnosis of the contemporary as a crisis of metanarrative brought about by global commodification and its ceaseless production of sensual compensations.

The main trope of Barney's work is "restraint" and it is graphically represented by the barred lozenge figure that recurs again and again in his work and that stands in for the work as a whole as a kind of marketing logo. Barney's understanding of artistic production, and by implication production in general, is that it is always the product of restraint, whether of a self-imposed discipline (such as the early "drawing restraint" harnesses and strategies) or the social restraint of conventions and rituals, whose performances form such a major part of the films (especially *Drawing Restraint 9*, 2006). "Restraint" is what Foucault called "discipline": the organization of bodies in practices producing a proliferation of counter-practices and narrative inversions. The "way of seeing" produced by Barney's work, however, is not the product of restraint, whether understood as immanent and local as in Foucault or, as in Jameson, the end result of the rationalization of the market. Rather, "restraint" is a mode of sense-making with which to contain awareness of the social production of culture and the senses. In other words, the need for a "total work of art" and the multiplex way of seeing it inaugurates in the *Cremaster Cycle* is neither necessitated by the technology of production fetishized in Barney's films, nor is it the necessary product of the destruction of meta-narratives of the contemporary caused by the triumph of the market over social life. These are superstructural effects that are treated as causes on the grounds that causal material knowledge is finally impossible now that "knowledge" has displaced labor as the source of value. In actuality, "restraint" is necessitated by the absolute dependence of labor on capital in the contemporary, which has normalized the self-reproduction of the worker. It teaches the workers to see the neoliberal privatization of social resources as the precondition for "self-fashioning" (acquiring an identity) and thus normalizes the "flexibility" (precariousness) of the current labor market.

As Marx predicted (in the "Appendix" to *Capital* Vol. I, "The Results of the Immediate Process of Production"), the universalization of the market has led to the normalization of extracting relative value over absolute surplus value from labor. Absolute surplus value is produced by cutting wages directly (getting paid less for the same unit output) or increasing working hours, which simply increases the amount of time the worker must labor over and above what is

necessary for meeting her needs. Relative surplus value is extracted more indirectly by the introduction of such techniques as speedups and micro-taylorization that increase productivity while reducing the socially necessary labor time needed to reproduce the worker's labor-power, thus increasing the surplus labor time in which the worker works for free for the capitalist. The shift from absolute to relative valorization represents the "real subsumption" of labor under capitalism, in which capital takes on the costs of its own augmentation through systematic innovations, rather than as in the past when labor was only "formally" subsumed under capital through the mechanism of the market and the costs of labor were subsidized through extra-economic means (such as subsistence farming or the welfare State). In the "global factory" the worker is totally dependent on the market, and the capitalist has receded from the production process and turned it over, highly rationalized and de-skilled, to the workers who now organize themselves to be more productive at the risk of losing their livelihoods completely. It is the emergence of the "global worker" who is both de-skilled and central to the relative production of surplus value that necessitates a "global art," which places a premium on complexity and multilinguality and a high tolerance of ambiguity and sensual immediacy such as Matthew Barney's. The modality of seeing culture as a multifarious practice of "restraint" (of a primary "gooey-ness") is to deny labor as the subject of history and normalize containment of such awareness under the guise of complexity and sheer pleasure.

The increasing abstraction Jameson locates in visual art, which he maintains may act as an emotional compensation for exploitation, is itself a modality of labor determined by the labor process. This is just as "the secrets which are disclosed to the eye of the physicist and chemist" (Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts" 46), and subsequently the artist as well, are the product of "industry and commerce," as "even this 'pure' natural science is provided with an aim, as with its material, only through trade and industry, through the sensuous activity of men" (46). What this means is that if the development of the senses has reached the point where we perceive a world made up of things as if purely in terms of their natural properties like color and form as in modern art, even to the point that the totality of human activity itself is seen as a virtual "interface" between the body and indistinguishable libidinal intensities impinging upon it, this is as much as to say that the senses have become commodified and are therefore only accessible at a price. Because the means to enjoyment must first be purchased in order to be consumed, it follows

that “enjoyment and labor, production and consumption, devolve on different individuals” (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 51) and cannot act as a compensation for exploitation. The enjoyment of art requires not only wages over and above the mere means of subsistence to purchase access to art but also to purchase the education to enjoy it. To hold out a libidinal compensation in consumption and the pleasure of the senses is to conveniently forget that access to consumption and its pleasures is a class matter determined by one’s place in production, a “forgetting” that is precisely ideological in that it acts to block access to consumption on the part of the exploited (the workers) by normalizing the class privilege of the exploiters (the owners). They, of course, have no need to be compensated as they do not lose anything in the production of commodities but only gain the surplus labor of others.

Jameson’s deployment of culture as a libidinal compensation for exploitation deconceptualizes the senses and once again turns culture into a self-enclosed locality cut off from the world historicity of labor. A materialist reading of culture, conversely, brings to the fore the necessity of praxis in all cultural productions: “praxis” as what Marx theorized as the materiality of labor, a “‘revolutionary’ . . . practical-critical, activity” that in transforming the objective world transforms humanity (“Theses on Feuerbach” 143). For a materialist reading, culture “reflects” objective reality, especially the dialectical interaction between humanity and nature as well as between men and women themselves. The enclosing of culture in on itself that Jameson recognizes to be a product of capitalist rationalization and the alienation of the senses it brings about, besides being a symptom of the commodification of culture and an index of exploitation, is also a precondition for the emancipation of culture from capital. The reification of culture from the labor relations, of which it is always a part, and the phantom objectivity it assumes in ideology represent the moment when culture ceases to be grasped in the mode of “tradition” or “convention” and becomes the object of conscious activity. The commodification of culture coincides with the social production of culture. As the current battles over intellectual copyright show, the political economy of culture problematizes its privatization on the market as an article of personal consumption. Contemporary culture is the combined activity of workers around the world in ways that call into question the private norms of ownership demanded by capitalism. The dominant ideology of culture has fetishized the new forms of culture such as the Internet and the global anticorporatism and contrasts them with what is considered a

hierarchal “modernist” past ruled by a linear and analogical thinking obsessed with its own identity and reproduction. But there can be no freedom from oppression without awareness of the ongoing collectivity of labor at the root of culture and the need of its emancipation from capital.

The “senses,” “emotions,” “passions,” are not “spontaneous”—they are the product of a history of labor in production (“the senses have . . . become directly in their practice *theoreticians*”). By positing “emotions” (passions, etc.) as independent of the history of labor, Negri and Jameson block any investigation into the *praxical* production of the emotions in capitalism. In short, the “passions” and so on (all code words for “experience”) comprise an effect that needs to be conceptually interrogated by investigating its conditions of production (through inquiry into the social relations of production, as I am arguing) and not taken as a given (i.e., as a self-motivating “cause”). By valorizing the experiential and subjective, Negri and Jameson cut off the possibility of such a conceptual reading and reify the effects of capitalism, thus limiting their theories to the terms set by the dominant culturalist ideology and its class politics. Culture viewed as free of the history of production is a reified view of culture that corresponds to the needs of those who have had their material needs met from the labor of the other. The “place” of culture in the totality does not lie in the experiences of the “heart” (sensuality) but in root knowledge (economics): “the all sided production of the whole earth” (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 59). It is only when the materiality of culture in labor relations is grasped that the “liberation of each single individual will be accomplished” (59). Jameson and Negri are participating in a more general “ethical turn” to validate the experience of workers in their celebrations of the compensatory value of culture in terms of experience. Against such a move it is necessary to return to Lenin’s critique of “spontaneity” and “proletarian culture,” of the “artificially restricted limits of *‘literature for workers’*” promoted by “(bad) intellectuals [who] believe it is enough ‘for workers’ to be told a few things about factory conditions and to have repeated to them over and over what has long been known” (*What Is To Be Done?* 40–41). Against all local delimitations of culture and pleading on the part of “special interests,” Lenin put forward the universality of culture and the necessity of grasping and completing the thoughts and actions of the past through “critique,” thus advancing culture to its inevitable conclusion in the construction of a truly free society—communism (“The Tasks of the Youth Leagues”).

## BARNEYWORLD: THE CULTURAL IMAGINARY OF THE GLOBAL FACTORY

The retrospective exhibition of Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* at the Guggenheim museum in New York provides an important occasion to inquire into the ongoing debates over the contemporary "real." One reason for this is because of the work's basic commitment to reactivate metanarrative as the aftereffect of conflicting binary forces and to explore how this return to the extra-discursive real challenges some of the basic assumptions of postmodernism, which argues that all the big issues that have divided masses, classes, and nations in the past, such as social inequality, for instance, are essentially over and attention now needs to be shifted to the local and micro-political, the space of discursive ethics and care of the self ("little-narratives").

Formally moving against the postmodern, the *Cremaster* project as a whole is a meta-tropic elaboration of the Lacanian real that gets figured in biological, psychological, hermeneutic, mythopoeic, and sociological terms. As Žižek explains, the Lacanian Real is "the non-symbolizable traumatic kernel that founds expression . . . in the very distortions of reality, in the fantasized displacement of the 'actual'. . . in the guise of spectral apparitions" (*Mapping* 25–6). In other words, what is outside culture is "real" at the level of its effects in constituting and disrupting discourse, but it cannot itself be positively and reliably known. I will argue that much discussion of the *Cremaster Cycle* has given undue importance to the biological tropes of the work by reading it exclusively in terms of cultural wars over sexual identity and misses its placement in the politics of the extra-discursive "real" as "non-symbolizable trauma." What focusing on the biological misses is the way in which cultural conventions such as gender and sexuality are themselves shaped by historical material forces such as class, which are also being engaged in the *Cremaster Cycle*, and, more importantly, at a time when never before has the world been so polarized between excess wealth and unmet need as now.

At the same time, however, "class" is being deployed in the *Cremaster Cycle* in the idealist space of the Lacanian Real, which, as Žižek elaborates, insists on the "interpretation of social antagonism (class struggle) as Real not as (part of) objective social reality" (*Mapping* 25). This gesture to, and displacement of, class as Real is an act of bourgeois cynicism that gets figured in the academic left imaginary, especially in the writings of Žižek, as the height of the political on the assumption that class as inscribed in the social relations of production—the result of the extraction of surplus labor

from propertyless wage-laborers—is no longer a reliable analytic in what are assumed to be new times.

My argument here that “class” is an explanatory concept of the contemporary that reveals the workings of bourgeois false consciousness will of course readily be dismissed as naïve on the grounds that it relies on an epistemological foundation that is not only subject to textual slippage and as such is unreliable as a guide to truth, but also, as in post- and neo-marxist writings, because it presupposes a social basis whose time is past. The familiar objections to “class” as explanatory of the contemporary social totality, because it is epistemologically unsound and/or an idea whose time is past, are themselves, however, reified understandings of the conceptual detached from its material basis in bourgeois property relations; the structure of ownership of the means of production that has not basically changed and that yet determines for the majority that their needs are incapable of being met so that they labor to provide profit for a few. The important thing that needs to be critiqued in Barney’s *Cremaster Cycle* is its return to and evacuation of class as a tropic performance in the time of global social inequality.

To repeat, the commentary surrounding Barney’s work focuses on the politics of sexual identity as inscribed in culture. This is in part because the word “cremaster” itself, in many ways the master trope of the cycle, is a biological term that refers to the muscular organ in the male that raises or lowers the testicles, whether because of fear and anxiety or for procreative purposes, for regulating the temperature of the sperm. *In utero* the cremaster muscle is, at least as imagined in Barney’s work, central to determining the sexual destiny of the fetus and therefore represents a primary determination of gender difference. On these biological terms, Barney is read as primarily engaged in a postfeminist queer art practice because of how his work both undermines gender difference while at the same time politicizing masculinity by revealing its cultural constructedness, thus pointing to the possibility of a “third” “hybrid” or cyber-sexed subject free of the normative gender ideologies of the past (Hodge). While focusing exclusively on the sexual politics of the work and how it subverts normative gender hierarchies appears radical in the left imaginary, it in actuality reflects the interests of the entrepreneurial “middle class” who are deeply invested in making class contradictions into conflicts over cultural values. This is done to defend their precarious position in the global division of labor as skilled workers at a time of rising awareness about the social costs of corporate dominance in the world.

The exhibition of the *Cremaster Cycle* at the Guggenheim itself marks its importance beyond the culture wars that assume that people's values are more important than class inequality. Barney was not the first recipient of the Hugo Boss award and given open access to the Guggenheim with funding in the millions of dollars by Delta Airlines because these powerful institutions believe that people's values are more important than profits, after all. Rather, Barney's celebrity signals the need for institutionalizing and legitimating the end of the post-al dogma that maintains the world has entered a new order in which the conflicts and concepts of the past have lost their explanatory and transformative power and circulate as merely ghostly simulacra and vehicles of consumer desires and cultural values at a time of rising class inequality.

What the dominant cultural commentary of the *Cremaster Cycle* misses because of its exclusive focus on cultural values is what is centralized by the Guggenheim exhibit itself in Barney's performance of *The Order*, which was staged in the museum: the return to such concepts as "totality," "class," and "class struggle" in Barney's work as well as the historical need to contain these concepts to the spectrality of the cultural as a zone free of the centrality of exploitation that grounds the ideology critique of capitalism and its knowledge industries. In short, Barney does the ideological work of the "center" by reconciling in the imaginary the poles of class society so as to, in effect, make side-taking seem "extreme" and therefore discredited, because it violates the norm of democracy as liberal pluralism that maintains the status quo. But democracy is really the freedom to exploit labor power, and it is this basic violence of capitalism that needs to be marked as extreme for a new society of equality.

A sign of the need to move beyond the merely cultural debates of postmodernism is how Barney is being framed in millenarian tones in the mainstream discourse as a "savior" of the dominant at a time of crisis: as *The Village Voice* puts it, Barney is "absolutely American" because, "[e]ven though his art can be oppressive, fussy, grandiose, melodramatic, supermale, hollow, hokey, dogged, and daft, I'm smitten by it" (Saltz). Being "moved" by art despite knowing its ideological function in the context of social injustice is said to have saved the "art world...in crisis" (Saltz). This is of course the formula of cynicism that Žižek, echoing Mannoni, states as: "they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it" ("Spectre" 8). What it reveals is a structure of assumptions, which Barney is reactivating, central to the dominant consumer consciousness that "saves" people from thinking and making political judgments about art at a time

when it is becoming impossible not to do so. It is this fundamental cynicism that makes Barney's work "absolutely American."

The millenarian reading of Barney as the savior of America at a time of ideological crisis is not solely a journalistic convention as it is featured in the title of Nancy Spector's curatorial introduction to the *Cremaster Cycle* itself, put out by the Guggenheim: "Only the Perverse Fantasy Can Still Save Us." The "perverse fantasy" is the "hubris" showcased in Barney's work because of its commitment to exhibit "pre-symbolic" drives as post-ideological: that is, because of its deep investment in symbolic innovations that disrupt normative conventions in the manner of a merely formal avant-garde tradition, but that do so at a time when such a project cannot be taken literally, because of its being obviously marked as masculinist and authoritarian in the cultural politics of desire in consumer capitalism, and must therefore be seen as ironic.

Barney is seen as an ironic savior of the dominant in times of crisis not because, as the *Voice* critic thinks, "Like all great art, Barney's exists beyond language," and, therefore, it saves us from thinking seriously about art. Neither is it because of Barney's "hubris" in asserting that his use of form "isn't overdetermined" (*The Cremaster Cycle* 7) by the ideological because it is multimedia, multicultural, transdisciplinary, and refuses narrative closure. He is seen as a "savior," in short, not because his work maintains a commitment to the freedom of the aesthetic above and beyond the analytical and political, but, rather, because he makes it seem so at a time when it has become impossible not to see the ideological function of contemporary culture as either going along with or resisting the growing social inequality forming in the wake of global capitalism—hence the cynical and defensive tone of the critics who laud it "even though it is oppressive."

By containing the political to the cultural, the dominant left imagines that parody is liberating because it undermines decided position-taking and thus opens up a space for negotiations and local reforms ("radical democracy"). Far from being an emancipatory politics, however, the ludic as radical democracy is a steady ally of the dominant, which needs to contain critique to the cultural superstructure so as to normalize the contradictions of the economic base. What radical democracy and its reformist codes does is reduce binarity to the epistemological so as to reveal the *differences within* every term and thereby occult the actual violence of the *difference between* exploiters and exploited. The most reliable guide to the ideological function of Barney's work is how it, albeit in an ironic tone, yet legitimates the



deeply conservative reading of art as “free” of class interest in the world divided between profit and need.

This contradiction of how pure and disinterested aesthetic form is at the same time, the most ideologically invested and dogmatically defended gives to the cultural commentary of Barney’s work a cynical tone (“even though it is oppressive . . . still . . .”; “only the perverse can save us”) that mirrors the parodic quality of his work itself that is activated in the discourses of the academic left as the limit of the political now. What needs to be reactivated as the political, however, is what is to be done to end exploitation and build a new society where the needs of all can be met, because the material preconditions of equality have already been produced by capitalism and further deferrals of what is needed to be done will only feed the barbarism of its decay. It is in the gap between what needs to be done and what is being done in the left imaginary in the name of the radical and emancipatory that the *Cremaster Cycle* turns class into another ludic narrative for the pleasure of the bourgeoisie.

Thus, even as discussions of the *Cremaster Cycle* insist on its integrity as what Spector calls a “self-enclosed aesthetic system,” and the Guggenheim exhibit itself (*The Order*) is a work about a work, a self-referential relay of the entire *Cremaster* project that consists of five films and numerous sculptures, drawings, installations, and books, this self-referentiality must be asserted with what Hegel called an “unhappy consciousness” (126). The unhappy consciousness is a divided consciousness that cannot reconcile the conflict between its knowledge of the “unchangeable” (the principled truth of class politics) and its practice as situated in the “changeable” (“things of this world,” Hegel 126), the contingency of everyday life in capitalism. Specifically, it cannot now reconcile the knowledge that any freedom in capitalism is merely formal as it serves to alibi the exploitation of labor. This is especially true now that contemporary art, like that of Barney’s, is so expensive to produce as to be capable of being funded only by corporations and to bear the marks of this complicity. It is an act of the highest cynicism, for instance, that the symbol of the *Cremaster* project itself—the barred lozenge figure, or “field-emblem,” that represents the cycle as a whole and signifies not only the impossibility of gender difference but of all conceptual binaries—functions like a corporate logo for the products of what the *New York Times* calls “Barneyworld,” such as the “concert” T-shirts and iron-on patches sold in the Guggenheim museum store and globally on the Internet as souvenirs of the exhibition.

Barneyworld, in short, is *absolutely* American because it has transformed the museum, which is supposed to be public space for producing oppositional knowledges that protect the social good from powerful special interests, into an annex of the market celebrating the power of capital.

Behind the celebration of Barney as what the *New York Times* critic calls “the most important American artist of his generation” and his claim that Barneyworld represents a “new freedom” for “art in the new century” (Kimmelman) is the commodification of art by monopoly capital. What is being marked as a savvy self-reflexivity in Barney’s work (“hubris,” etc.) and a newfound freedom in contemporary art from the ideological past is in actuality a cynical awareness that art is enslaved by class in the contemporary and a thinly veiled attempt to alibi its corporate takeover as serving the social good.

*The Order* itself not only represents a summary presentation of the entire *Cremaster Cycle* in symbolic form, because in it Barney has turned the ramps of the museum into five stages of a mock Masonic ritual that mirror the entire cycle of films that make up the project as a whole, but it is also an allegory of the cycle that appears within the film *Cremaster 3*, which is the five-part cycle’s central work. This doubling is significant because it symbolically identifies the Guggenheim with the Chrysler building, whose construction provides the narrative backdrop to the film. This overlapping suggests the loss of the museum’s autonomy from capital as well as the need for capital to have an ideological cover for its power.

In the narrative of *Cremaster 3*, despite its Masonic theology and Oedipal overtones, Barney appears as a worker in struggle against the capitalist, played by the artist Richard Serra. Although these figures have been to a certain extent “declassified” in the highly allegorical presentation staged in the Guggenheim, the fact that crowning the work is the barred lozenge figure that functions as the corporate logo of Barneyworld, its draping over the rotunda’s glass ceiling implying a limit to the upward mobility enacted in the performance of *The Order* in the museum, seems to suggest an awareness that what one sees in the museum now is not a cultural enclave that protects the public good from vested interests that have grown too powerful, but rather the signaling of the impossibility of such protection because of the final commodification of the space of art and the end of social progress. The end of social progress is suggested because *The Order* provides a spectacle of absolute corporate power above and beyond its internal contradictions as well as any external limit. This can be seen not only in the story line of the work because of how

it resolves the struggle between the “capitalist-master” (Serra) and “worker-apprentice” (Barney) in the mutual destruction of both, but also in the mode of the narration itself because of how at the end of the work, at the top of the Guggenheim ramp, the viewer is ushered into a room of mourning in which the symbols of artistic freedom—the stylized manacles of the escape artist Harry Houdini played by Barney in *Cremaster 5*—lie entombed in a coffin of glass, a testimony to the trap that art has become because of its being tied to the failed libertarian ideology of individualism, the self-made subject whose loss the narrative of upward mobility *The Order* rehearses and, finally, mourns.

The story of failed mastery/progress is ironically mocked by the tone of its presentation, which the catalogue refers to as “game show meets NFL or, perhaps, *Let’s Make A Deal* meets *American Gladiator*” (*The Order 4*), because of the use of Barney’s signature blue Astroturf and athletic padding (from *Cremaster 1*) as well as the presentation of the spectacle of Barney’s climb to the top of the hundred-foot spiral of the museum on the five massive video screens that hang suspended from the ceiling of its Rotunda as in a sporting event. But, in another way, the narrative is pervaded by a crude biological literalism that dissimulates its politics in nature and proposes as a movement beyond the dismissive politics of ludic parody a counter-narrative of the real as the impossibility of binarity that, by implication, maintains the ideology of the death of class in the contemporary.

Barney’s ascent in the Guggenheim space symbolizes the descent of the testicles that is mapped in the *Cremaster Cycle* and therefore, in the biological tropes of the cycle, narrates the story of gender differentiation: in the character of the Entered Apprentice, the Masonic surrogate of the worker from *Cremaster 3*, Barney wears the costume of a Scottish tribesman whose tartan is colored in skin tones criss-crossed with the blue and red of veins and arteries symbolizing the cremaster muscle itself. He enters the first level where he encounters some Rockettes in the costume of The Order of the Rainbow for Girls, a Masonic organization for women, who echo the Busby Berkeley synchronized dancers of *Cremaster 1* that represent a state of sexual undifferentiation in the mythos of the cycle. On the next “degree” the Apprentice encounters two New York City hardcore bands (Agnostic Front and Murphy’s Law) that symbolically represent the Law of the Father, which imposes systemic cultural violence on the subject so as to construct sexual difference for the purpose of regulating social reproduction. They thus refer back to *Cremaster 2*, which tells the story of Garry Gilmore who was executed by the State

of Utah for murder and who was so confused as to his own sexuality that he thought of his execution as a way to resolve it and become the “man” he was expected to be by Mormon law. Next the Apprentice confronts the sexual drive itself in the form of Aimee Mullins, the amputee tack star and fashion model who in the hybrid form of a cheetah inflicts a wound on the Apprentice and is killed by him so that he may become the fully adult male represented by Richard Serra in the character of the Master Mason at the next level, which in this way also incorporates the story of *Cremaster 4* where the testicles finally descend by force because they are attached to two racing motorcycles symbolizing the biological drive. The mutual death of the Apprentice and the Master leads to the work of mourning in *Cremaster 5* and the last exhibit room of *The Order* that tops the Guggenheim ramp, which documents the loss of the self that up to this point had been totally identified with a highly naturalized understanding of sexuality as biological destiny. In the mythopoeic imaginary of the *Cremaster Cycle*, mourning the loss of the male self as adult-father represents the ultimate impossibility of fixing sexual identity and thus the possibility of escaping its social normativity.

Such an understanding is, of course, itself marked by class privilege in so far as it posits individual escape from social norms as the limit of human freedom rather than collective transformation of the social itself for the good of all. In other words, within the sexual politics of the work is reflected the bourgeois ideology of the contemporary as being shaped by knowledge—the knowledge that with the breakup of the modern patriarchal family and its related codes, gender must be seen as a cultural construct—rather than labor—the actuality that capitalism has jettisoned the family and its fixed gender norms because these institutions no longer adequately serve to reproduce labor relations and augment profit in the transnational high-tech economy.

The ideological effect of the *Cremaster Cycle* is more than a matter of identifying its position in ongoing debates about gender or agency. Such a reading fails to engage its basic commitment to a logic of “excess” that formally challenges normativity and the way such a commitment evacuates the multiple forms that the project thus robs of their historicity and therefore of their conceptual value as tied to social relations as a whole—especially the logic of exploitation inscribed in the antagonism between capital and wage-labor. More important than any unproblematic statement it seems to make as commentary about contemporary social relations and the possibility of change or how it constructs decided knowledge as an arbitrary but imperative choice for the subject, the *Cremaster Cycle* seems to exceed

the possibility of securing positive and reliable knowledge because of its being multimedia, multicultural, and transdisciplinary. It is more important because in the contemporary dominant imaginary “knowledge” has displaced “labor” as “the principle force of production” (Lyotard 5). In short, I am arguing that it is the conceptual hybridity of the work—its inscription of the social difference between the owners and workers as differences within ideas—that provides the necessary ideological work of capital in the contemporary because of how it indexes a historically necessary global consciousness—what Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* theorized as an emergent “world historical communist consciousness” produced by capitalism itself. The ideological function of the *Cremaster Cycle* is to contain this emergent communist consciousness to the secondary by locating it in the matrix of culture at a moment in history when orthodox Marxist theory has never been more explanatory and, therefore, more of a global “material force” in transforming capitalism into socialism.

It is more because Barney mixes media by producing video, film, sculpture, drawing, performance, and so on; places Vaseline next to precious metals; pop culture such as Busby Berkley, hardcore bands, country and western music alongside high culture like opera and the discourses of the arts and sciences; mixes the metaphors of the arts and sciences themselves by appropriating tropes from biology, mythology, theology, ideology, politics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and so on; hybridizes gender and sexuality; blurs the line between antagonistic social forces such as capital and labor, public and private, Irish republicanism and British imperialism; and deconstructs the personal and political as a matter of tropes, that has made him such steady ally of the dominant today and such a celebrated figure in the media. It is in this way that Barney’s work provides the necessary consciousness skills now needed by big business to reproduce the high-tech labor force from which it realizes the most surplus value. These workers need to be given complex knowledges to work with the globally integrated digitalized production systems of the global factory. At the same time, the knowledge must be presented in such a way as to produce what Althusser called “good subjects,” that is, subjects who go along with what is good for capital and “spontaneously” resist knowledge of their collective exploitation.

It is not solely the underlying tone of cynicism that pervades Barney’s work, because of its deep commitment to epistemic undecidability as resistance to cultural norms, that makes it ideologically effective in disguising class inequality in the contemporary. What could be less effective than repeating an old avant-garde? Rather, its

main effectivity lies in how Barney maintains the old story of culture as free of the economic while providing the viewer with an encounter with complexity that demands a global knowledge, even as the work argues against its possibility in the story it provides. In this way, the *Cremaster Cycle* serves the ruling class by jettisoning its outdated ideas. As Marx writes:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society . . . Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones . . . And as in material, so also in intellectual production . . . The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (Marx and Engels, "The Manifesto of the Communist Party" 476)

Following Marx and Engels, I argue that the *Cremaster Cycle* provides a lesson in "global literacy" that has become necessary under transnational capitalism, which needs multicultural and high-tech workers to consent to their own exploitation as wage-laborers and secures this precondition of profit by giving them a false-consciousness of their position. The *Cremaster Cycle* produces this class effect by evacuating all conceptual binaries of their historical materiality by relaying them through a thick network of multiple significations that is framed as exceeding ideological closure but that is in actuality a socially necessary ensemble of consciousness skills in the global factory.

In the narrative of *The Order* staged in the Guggenheim, contemporary class conflicts are re-narrated as personal obstacles in a complex and dramatic story of self-fashioning that finally fails to achieve the autonomy of identity and freedom of agency promised by an older bourgeois ideology. The ideological effect of its mode of presentation, however, is that when one enters Barneyworld the conflicts and contradictions of the past are discursively suspended so as to be appreciated as an encyclopedic archive that the aesthetic ideology of the ruling class positions as the site of pure immediacy and pleasure above and beyond class exploitation and conflict. Barneyworld, in the voice of the *New York Times*, makes us "Free To Play and Be Goocy" and to cynically assert, as the *Village Voice* says, as proof of one's own absolute Americanism, that "Even though his art can be oppressive,

fussy, grandiose, melodramatic, supermale, hollow, hokey, dogged, and daft,” still—“I’m smitten by it.” The point of a radical materialist cultural critique, however, is to resist the logic of the “smitten” by reactivating the conceptual, not as more ludic mediations and local negotiations, but as root knowledge of the social as exploitation—for social change.

## WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH MATERIALISM(S)?

### AFTER-ING THEORY

One of the crisis texts of cultural theory was the *Critical Inquiry* conference on “theory” held in Chicago in April 2003. The conference was a defense of the spectral (anti-foundational) theory that dominated the academy throughout the ’80s and ’90s, but because this spectral theory of theory has since lost its credibility with the loss of U.S. economic hegemony and political legitimacy in the world, the presenters all had to acknowledge in different ways the need for an “other” theory, hence the popularity of ethics, aesthetics, and activism at the conference. Because it was typical, I will focus on Bruno Latour’s essay that formed the initial statement of the issue of *Critical Inquiry* that covered the conference.

In his text, Latour claims that theory is dead because it has cancelled itself: it has been “eaten up by the same debunking impetus” it used to reserve for “matters of fact” (232). Theory forgot, according to Latour, that matters of fact are really “renderings of matters of concern” (232) that reflect “the things really close to our hearts,” like “the God to whom I pray, the works of art I cherish, the colon cancer I have been fighting, the piece of law I am studying, the desire I feel, indeed, the very book I am writing” (243). Theory, he claims, has traditionally mistaken its own concern “*toward* the conditions” (231) that make facts possible in the first place as a universal concern and thus “distanced” itself from matters of the “heart.”

Latour’s story about the death of theory and the rebirth of the spiritual depends on representing theory in a technological guise against the naturalness of the “heart”: he calls theory “equipment” (231) and compares it to armaments (225, 231), on one hand, and contrasts it to the “new” theory as a “rendering of matters of concern,” on the



other. It is the function of the “equipment” of theory to “debunk”: “debunking” is what Latour calls the search for “causal explanations” (229) that “reveal the real objective and incontrovertible facts hidden behind the illusions of prejudices” (227). The effect of making theory-as-critique a kind of “tool” is to reify theory from the social relations and to consider what happens in theory as self-caused and self-involved. Thus, his claim that “causal explanations” have “out-lived their usefulness” (228) because they depend on “the whole notion of social and society” (230), which he dismisses as a “social neverland” (230) that no longer exists anyway “since... the proletariat... passed away” (226). But it is Latour’s understanding of theory as “equipment” that has consumed itself that is an illusion, and not the connection between theory and labor. If the material rootedness of theory in the labor relations was simply false after all, and theory stands revealed as an illusion, why would Latour need to spend so much time “debunking” it by the “facts” of the “heart”? Latour gives one indication of why—his paycheck. He alludes to “the lights of the Enlightenment” having been “slowly turned off, and some sort of darkness appears to have fallen on campuses” (232) as if it were unrelated to the privatization of the university by big business and simply the result of theory eating itself. The life and death of theory, however, is a matter of the rise and fall of profit, and is not self-caused.

Theory was needed during the cold war to counter the critique of capitalism by socialism and at that time it served to deconstruct all binaries, turning them into formal equivalents, thus serving the dominant. After the Berlin Wall was destroyed, theory changed, and the anti-foundationalism that was once the result of a highly mediated and literate deconstruction in the founding texts of theory became normalized as a social theory of difference—in the writings of Foucault and Laclau, for example—and theory legitimated the new borderless capitalism. Today the West has lost its economic hegemony to emergent capitalist regimes such as China, and theory is declared to be over. Culturalism, which puts values in place of concepts, has taken its place to manage the crisis. By turning theory from a rigorous inquiry into the conditions of knowledge production to an ethics that adjusts itself to existing prejudices, Latour distances theory from the daily to make it more amenable to capital. A sign of this fact is that even as he argues theory is dead, he defends a new “rendering” of it, theory with a heart, that will “inspire respect for... the objects of science and technology” (232) in the same way religion “inspires” respect for God or aesthetics does for Art. Latour’s “inspirational” theory exhibits a pathological distrust of technology as a malevolent

alien force, and in reaction gives an occasionalist view of the social as providing serial moments of emotional attachment as therapy.

Latour assumes that theory is a tool (equipment) and that with changes in the types of tools used today a fundamental change has taken place socially that changes theory. In his story about the end of theory, theory-as-critique loses its claim to legitimacy since the public has absorbed “a popularized, that is teachable version of social critique” (228)—a conclusion he seems to have reached by noticing the marketing campaign of a recent film he alludes to—that is out of touch with “the challenges of the present” (231). According to Latour, because the public practices a form of “gullible criticism” (230) in which “Everything is suspect . . . Everyone is for sale . . . And nothing is what it seems” (quoting *L.A. Confidential*, 230), it is necessary to “no longer . . . debunk but to protect and to care . . . to inspire respect for . . . the objects of science and technology” (232). On one hand, Latour claims that theory (as root knowledge) is dead because there no longer exists a class for whom such “equipment” is necessary, while, on the other, he declares the popularity of such root inquiry as itself a delegitimation of theory, which he assumes is supposed to “care” about things and “inspire respect” for “things of the heart” and not give praxical explanations. Latour constructs a theory of theory that fetishizes theory as technology and makes what happens in theory the unfolding of the spiritual essence of history. In his narrative, theory is a self-moving technique of thought without a subject, whose changes produce the world we see. Hence, according to him, theory as critique is dead because the proletariat no longer exists and “there is no greater crime than to address with the equipment of an older period the challenges of the present one” (231). The “present” in this story demands an end to causal knowledge of the world because history has produced a new “sacred” relation to science and technology. Such a theory of theory as a self-enclosed understanding that functions on its own independently and constitutive of the social simply passively reflects the fact that the present is characterized by a drive for technological innovation in the context of ruthless transnational competition for profits that demands the population care about the needs of big business. What the death and rebirth of theory that is represented by Latour as a shift from the heartless theory-as-critique to an ethical theory with a heart shows is that what is at stake in theory is not in actuality the morality of theory but its class function.

Latour's assumption that theory is a kind of “equipment” that cancels its own origins is in actuality itself rooted in the mode of production. Engels, after all, who thought of “theory” as an “aptitude

for purely scientific investigation" ("Ludwig Feuerbach" 380), had already long ago recognized that the traditional social basis of theory had disappeared with the dominance of capitalism. He explained that because theory depends for its exercise on the freedom of inquiry "irrespective of whether the result obtained" is "practically applicable or not" or whether it is "likely to offend the police authorities or not" (380), it "disappear[s] completely" (381) at a time when "an anxious concern for career and income, descending to the most vulgar job hunting" and "patronage from above" (381) becomes a necessity. However, unlike Latour who presently at precisely just such a time calls for the dismantling of theory and a turn toward the affective, Engel's argues that it is indeed at such times that theory is most of all necessary if thought is not to become "an ideology, that is, occupation with thought as with independent entities, developing independently and subject to their own laws" (376), which would effectively make theory merely a reflection of the given estrangement of men and women from their own productions, enshrining rather than contesting the monopolization of material resources by the powers that be. It is at such times that theory as critique becomes revolutionary according to Engels, because "the more ruthlessly and disinterestedly science proceeds" despite such economic obstacles "the more it finds itself in harmony with the interests and aspirations of the workers" who have "no concern for careers" or "profit making" (381). In short, Engels draws the exact opposite conclusion from the "end of theory" as does Latour and finds in it not the disappearance of material causality and positive knowledge and a new age of faith-based initiatives, but further evidence of the link between ideas and their material basis in class relations.

Theory is not "equipment" or the "toolbox" Deleuze and Guattari reduced it to in *A Thousand Plateaus*, so as to claim that "There is no ideology and never has been" (4). The reason to consider theory as a "tool," as the writings of Heidegger show with their consideration of theory as "ready-to-hand" explanations of the world, is to mystify the social conditions that alone explain why theory is a necessity and make the agent of theory the individual, the private property owner, and thus turn theory into a commodity. The privatization of theory has always been the not so hidden agenda of Western Humanism since Plato, and it needs to be sharply contrasted with Marx's understanding of theory as "conscious life activity" ("Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" 68) in common (species being), theory as the "appropriation of man's essential powers...in thought" (129), a necessary precondition for what he calls "consistent humanism" (92)

or “communism.” Theory in this sense “represents a class” (Postface to the second edition of *Capital*, 98) who “have no ideals to realize” (Marx, “Civil War in France”) because of their position in the division of labor with only their labor power to sell and who are thus forced “to face with sober senses [their] real conditions of life” (Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”). Theory of course would be “superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly corresponded” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. III ch. 48) as in idealist and empiricist theory, which makes experience the truth of the world and turns theory into “interpretation.”

Theory as critique is under attack today by culturalist discourses because it exposes the complicity of knowledge with class and thereby compromises the ideology of knowledge as the source of value that is central to cyber-capitalism. Because of the need of capital for science, however, the attack on theory is forced to take on the form of a defense of theory, but a theory shorn of its root knowledge and turned into a speculative value, hence the spectral theory represented by *Critical Inquiry*. In his attack on the “gullible criticism” of the masses, Latour’s defense of the spectral theory is ultimately not a very effective way of marketing theory in what is supposed to be the moment of a new, more ethical time. Now the most effective defense of the emptying out of theory in the name of theory itself is when the spirit of theory is pitted against the injustices of capitalism, as in Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory*.

Eagleton offers what he claims is a Marxist defense of theory, but he effectively abandons the materialist project of critique by giving a highly reified notion of theory that repeats the dominant (ghost) story about it in another guise. Eagleton defends materialist theory by uncovering the need for a concept of “materiality” as that which “gets in the way” (*After Theory* 118) of the “capitalist success ethic” (116), which he glosses as the idea that “we might be able to know what it was to live well just by looking into ourselves, or simply by instinct” (110). Because capitalism according to Eagleton depends on a “ruthlessly instrumental logic” (119) that demands “everything... must have its point and purpose” (116) so as to build up the expectation of a “reward” for “acting well” (116), and reserves punishments for acting in ways that do “not have a goal” (115), he argues that defending the idea of “the material ‘species being’ of humanity” (120) is a radical act of transgression (119). This is because he sees this concept as positing humanity as having a cultural root while culture for him is understood as purposeless activity for its own sake. But is “the idea of fulfilling your nature” Eagleton finds exemplified in culture really

“inimical to the capitalist success ethic” (110)? Capitalism, after all, depends on constant technical innovation to realize relative surplus value by cutting the amount of time workers engage in necessary labor to reproduce the value equivalent of their wages and increasing the amount of time spent in surplus labor that forms the basis of the capitalist’s profit. To argue that “it is in our nature to go beyond ourselves” and “give birth to culture, which is always changeable, diverse and open ended” (119) and thus “resistant” to instrumentality, is to naturalize the law of value that drives capitalism by embedding the drive for innovation in human nature. Making culture the root of humanity also homogenizes culture as reflecting a universal “sense of belonging” (21) that “humanizes” both oppressor and oppressed rather than a site of class antagonism over the material resources that determine who’s needs are being met and whose are not, who is “humanized” by capital and feels at home in the world and who is “dehumanized” by it.

But what about Eagleton’s argument that not only is culture essentially anticapitalist but that it is the material root of human nature and as such an incontestable “absolute truth” (*After Theory* 103)? On this argument he says that in the same way that “you cannot ask why a giraffe should do the things it does” (116), one cannot ask why humanity produces culture, or, in other words, ask what is the purpose of culture. In both cases, however, nature is taken to be a static and unchanging thing, as if giraffes ever existed outside an ever changing and evolving material environment that, actually, always does explain why they should do what they do and not something else, which is, of course, what Darwin’s theory of natural selection is all about. Not only does Eagleton assume that what makes a giraffe is immanent to the giraffe outside the material environment in which it must find food, shelter, and other giraffes, thus effectively giving the giraffe, in place of its actual nature, a normative cultural identity (a kind of spiritual essence inscribed in its genes, supposedly), but he also naturalizes culture by treating it as a kind of secretion that is spontaneously produced by human beings naturally. Eagleton, following an aesthetic tradition within Western (Hegelian) Marxism since Adorno, defends “the concept of culture” as “the cultivation of human powers as ends in themselves” (24) on the argument that not only is an immanent understanding of culture “resistant” to the law of value but that it is also embedded in human nature. And yet, such a self-reflexive concept of culture is not coincident with humanity as a species, and a long period of natural evolution from bipedalism and the opposable thumb to economic (i.e., conscious) organization and

tool making precedes language and “art,” the first cultural practices that have the formation of the subject specifically as their purpose. It is only by suppressing knowledge of human evolution and the origins of culture in labor that culture can be made to seem “purposeless” (i.e., a natural endowment rather than socially produced). But not only is culture always purposeful (“language is practical consciousness,” as Marx says) because it is economic in essence—it produces a consciousness of the material process necessary to sustain human life and helps wrest control over the material world so that humans are not the slaves of chance and necessity—it also has cross-purposes that arise, for instance, when short- and long-term purposes come into conflict, such as when the needs of immediate survival conflict with long-term sustainability, or, as when culture serves to “contain” conflicting class interests.

Culture in the sense Eagleton uses it is held to be “disinterested” activity that is carried out for its own sake rather than instrumentally as a means to an end, as Kant argued. But whereas Kant believed that culture was grounded in and reflected transcendental truths, Eagleton maintains that “cultural ideas change with the world they reflect upon” (*After Theory* 22). At other times what he means by the “world” here is referred to as the “historical context” (22) or, simply, “reality” (23). Nevertheless, whatever the word he uses for the idea of the “thing-in-itself,” the question remains that if ideas are determined by what they “reflect upon,” rather than what they reflect, what is being claimed is that ideas reflect themselves in the sense that ideas when put to work take themselves for their own material. Thus, Eagleton’s understanding of theory is totally spectral; he calls it “critical self-reflection” (27), “a reasonably systematic reflection on our given assumptions” (2), which is just another way of saying that ideas are self-caused, that “ideas change with the world they reflect upon” rather than change with changes in the structure of necessity. On Eagleton’s logic, ideas “reflect” reality and the reality that theory “reflects” is its own ideas. So, not only is Eagleton’s concept of “species being” in the end not a materialist understanding of humanity but a cultural one, culture itself is thought of as merely reflecting ideas, thus effectively defining the human spiritually. To define theory as an “end-in-itself” in the way Eagleton does is simply to uncritically accept a highly reified notion of reality where thought is held to exist in itself, in contradistinction to the real world lying “out there,” and thus to relegate change to the level of ideas and posit “nature” as an untransformable, and therefore incontestable, “bottom-line concept” (116). Not only is such a theory of theory not anticapitalist,

capitalism actually necessitates such theory in which relations between human beings are seen as relations between determinate things, on one hand, while ideas are essentially free, on the other, because capitalism specializes labor into different technical activities that require special skills and in the process mystifies the social process as a whole. To “cultivate” such a reified notion of human activity as a cultural “end-in-itself” against the “is-ness” of the world simply facilitates the process of reification, which is grounded in exploitation, and helps privatize knowledge, thus strengthening the grip of necessity of bourgeois rule.

In Marx’s terms, Eagleton’s culturalist theory is trying to end the “ideal” estrangement of humanity at the level of ideas by returning culture to its root in species being while forgetting the dependence of humanity on the “real” or “practical” estrangement of private property. Such a distinction is “metaphysical” for culturalist theory, of course—if culture is both the root of human nature and an absolute truth in itself, what real distinction is there between ideas and material reality? But this is to elide a very important distinction that Marx raises. Marx’s argument is not that “real” estrangement (private property) is more important than ideal estrangement (cultural alienation) so that ending it must come first, he actually argues that “the nature of the movement [the reappropriation of estranged human life] initially depends on whether the actual and *acknowledged* life of the people has its being more in consciousness or in the external world, in ideal or real life” (*Early Writings* 345). Neither does real for Marx mean “absolute” or “categorical” for defining the moral essence of man. Marx is using real in the sense of practical or material in that the movement to abolish “real” estrangement “embraces both aspects” (349) of estrangement at once—the estrangement of ideas from their social basis when they are considered self-caused and the estrangement of human powers embodied in private property—while the contrary is not the case. In other words, the Hegelian inversion of “substance” as “subject” that negates the estrangement of ideas from their material basis when they are considered self-caused (as codified “thought”) is itself an ideological false consciousness precisely in the sense that it does not “embrace” the universal estrangement of labor under capitalism but only concerns itself with the alienated “labor of the concept” (Hegel). What is radical about Marx’s critique of estrangement and the theory of humanism he advances is that it foresees the need of overcoming the necessity of expressing humanity negatively through the concept of the “reappropriation” of its estranged essence as a whole, as he argues it is “only when

we have superseded this mediation—which is however a necessary precondition—will *positive* humanism, positively originating in itself, come into being” (345). In other words, the question is not about whether alienation is primarily to be considered subjective or objective—which, because the experience of alienation is historically relative, is an idealist way to present the issue—but about de-fetishizing theory, the root knowledge necessary to end alienation. If the cause of alienation is considered purely a matter of ideology, then Hegel would be right and the end of “objectification” would come about through the movement of concepts, when the subject realizes that what he assumed to be “substance” is in actuality “subject” and thus concludes that the “real is rational” and thereby learns, in effect, to identify agency with support of the status quo. On the other hand, if alienation is seen as having purely natural causes, either lying in the brain or simply personal hardships, then ending it would simply be a technical problem like changing one’s lifestyle or brain chemistry. Both these positions turn theory into therapy and adjust themselves to getting along within the existing conditions. As in spiritual discourses, they represent agency as the negation of the object world rather than its productive transformation through collective labor. Marx’s “consistent humanism” is thus “distinct from both idealism and materialism, and constitutes at the same time the unifying truth of both” (135) in that it overcomes the traditional one-sidedness of both these positions with a concept of critique-al praxis, in short, labor as the creative self-objectification of humanity.

Latour’s and Eagleton’s idealizations of theory as a self-enclosed cultural activity represent a return to the Enlightenment view of theory, or, in other words, humanist cultural theory, which posits culture as the other of materiality. Humanist cultural theory since Kant considers culture—grasped as essentially spiritual and aesthetic values—as free of material and conceptual conflicts. Culture is above politics, economics, and sharp conceptual distinctions, and provides a soothing compensation against the dehumanizing imperatives of modern life as well as a timeless expression of our basic humanity. Humanism is supposed to put man as he is at the center of things, but the subject of humanism is not humanity as it is encountered in nature but a timeless individual who embodies “our dignity as moderately rational creatures” (Eagleton, *After Theory* 109) and who is arbitrarily placed in opposition to the general cultural decay. Culture, as a consequence, is considered “a harmonious totality” (Eagleton 25) that distinguishes man as unique in nature because he is spiritual in essence, and history is seen as “the steady unfolding... of the



essence of humanity” (33) from out of itself rather than as part of natural history.

It is within this idealist humanist tradition that Heidegger claims that “every humanism is either grounded in a metaphysics or is itself to be the ground of one” (“Letter on Humanism” 225) and effectively collapses the distinction between idealism and materialism. Where Marx argues that the “unifying truth” of idealist and materialist theory is labor, Heidegger claims “labor” is a “metaphysical determination” (243) and that “language is the house of Being” (217), thus negating the distinction and placing language outside the material series of social practices. But even Heidegger’s concept of language is a material activity inserted into socially abstract labor. His own “liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework” is articulated in opposition to the “technical interpretation of thinking” (218), “objectification” (221), and the “dictatorship of the public realm” (221), and in a materialist framework it can be seen as an idealist appropriation of estranged labor. It is idealist because the language of “multidimensionality” that Heidegger claims resists the “deliberate linguistic formulation[s]” of the sciences (“‘philosophy’ [220] as well as ‘logic,’ ‘ethics,’ and ‘physics,’” 219) is itself a highly rationalized discourse that presupposes a high level of social production. But in his resistance to “objectification,” Heidegger embraces “feeling or mood” as “more reasonable—that is, more intelligently perceptive—because more open to Being than all that reason” (“The Origin of the Work of Art” 151), and tries to present his concepts in the guise of spontaneous insights into the essence of things. Heidegger reinscribes “experience” as the basis of knowing, not the experience of John Locke but an inverted form of it in which the knowledge said to inhere in the object is always culturally mediated by the “world” of the subject:

We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things, as this thing-concept alleges; rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-motored plane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. (151–2)

The thing-in-itself on this reading is an effect of the subject who “bestows essence as a gift” (220) on something whenever he “loves” (220) it, in much the same way that Latour argues that theory is always a “rendering of matters of concern” or Eagleton’s understanding of

culture as self-realization, rather than an inquiry into materiality. It is the opposition made between culture (language, concern, self-realization) and materiality as mere "technique" in these discourses that exemplifies what I have been calling humanist cultural theory, as distinct from a materialist humanism that sees in ideal as well as real things the objectifications of social labor transforming nature in accordance with human need.

## MIMESIS AND IDEOLOGY

It has become almost impossible to distinguish idealist and materialist theory today because cultural theory is almost totally discussed in terms of language, and what is thought to distinguish theories is their position on "language" rather than their orientation to labor. Without such a distinction being possible, cultural theory remains bound to culturalism and simply updates a rather traditional humanist (idealist) aesthetics rather than move beyond it toward a consistent and positive (materialist) humanism. Because, as one text on the new humanities puts it, "one of the most important contemporary forms of the debate about humanism centers on the relation between language and meaning" (Fuery and Mansfield 4), it is necessary to investigate questions revolving around *mimesis* and theory of language to explain the contestations over humanism in contemporary cultural theory.

Humanist cultural theory since Plato understands language as mimesis. Mimesis is the imitation, or, in terms of linguistics, the "representation" of nature in human consciousness. Culture, on these terms, is transcendent of the material world and the depository of reason. The classical theory of "representation" (mimesis) as rational was considered necessary for giving men *mastery* over their own nature. For example, the play of light and shadow in Plato's cave is an allegory of knowledge "to illustrate the degrees in which our nature may be enlightened or unenlightened" (*The Republic* vii 514) and is a highly value coded mediation on representation: hence, if the "prisoners" chained in the cave in such a way so as to be only able to see the shadows cast by the light behind them "could talk to one another, would they not suppose that their words referred only to those passing shadows?" (vii 514), while "release from the chains . . . of meaningless illusion" brings one "nearer to reality," able to see "things themselves," which are "the cause of all" (vii 515–16). Such knowledge of cause is considered necessary for "healing" the "unwisdom" (vii 515) of those who take appearances as real. Understanding the place of representation as secondary (effect of a cause) is thus necessary for

establishing the good and is also what subordinates representation to a pedagogical purpose that necessitates a distinction between orders of the real in nature. Plato's allegory of the cave is, after all, analogous to the "puppet show" being viewed by the prisoners, in that it contains images of "persons carrying along various artificial objects" (vii 514) that merely represent "things themselves" indirectly to people who, if they did view the objects directly, would be "perplexed and believe the objects now shown . . . to be not so real as he formally saw" (vii 515). Because representation is at one and the same time "meaningless illusion" and a necessary pedagogical mediation, Plato must make a distinction that will prove the power of man's judgment and mastery of himself as a maker of men. Thus "representation in general" (x 595), or *mimesis*, is a mere semblance of knowledge because it presumes to name a "real mastery" of "not only all technical matters but also all about human conduct" (x 599) without in actuality possessing such knowledge as would qualify one "to educate people and make them better men" (x 600). It follows that an "artist" merely works in "images" so as "to impress an audience which is equally ignorant and judges only by the form of expression" (x 600), while the true master changes men by revealing to them "what courses of conduct will make men better or worse as individuals or as citizens" (x 600).

As Plato's text shows, culturalism is not new. It has even recently codified its own canon (*The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*), which dates its beginnings to ancient Greece. What has always distinguished culturalism from materialism is its giving priority to "ideas" in the understanding of nature and the separation of ideas from the natural world. Materialism, on the contrary, has always insisted that "ideas" themselves are the result of a certain organization of objective reality. Culturalism represents nature in a reified way, or, put differently, it has ascribed objectivity to ideas and considered the material world a "bad" copy. Central to culturalism has always been the question of "value" as a spiritual essence that gives meaning to the material world rather than being a social relation. The question of "value" is one of the intellectual issues that have shaped the entire course of Western philosophy. In Plato's *Phaedo*, for example, value is made central to Socrates' discourse on method, which consists of assuming "some principle . . . judged to be the strongest," which allows the individual to affirm as "true whatever seemed to agree with this . . . and that which disagreed" to be regarded as "untrue" (100a). In Aristotle too the goal of philosophical inquiry is to secure the "good" through the judicial use of "reason" (*logos*).

The subject of reason was the subject capable of making a value judgment considered as a “free choice” between the “good” and its opposite. In ancient Greek, *logos* names the principle of “computation,” “accounting,” “proportion,” and “measure,” as well as “ground,” “reason,” and “law,” and was synonymous with *axios* (“good”) and *axia* (“value”). Applied to persons, value judgment was believed to adhere to an individual’s essential “character” or “disposition,” which is what makes them “unique” (“character” in ancient Greek means to “engrave,” “stamp,” or “brand,” and is synonymous with “ethos,” a person’s “bearing,” which indicates “rank” or “status,” what in Latin is called *habitus*). To be able to determine “value” (what a thing “is” by nature or a person’s essential “character”) was connected to determining what it would become, so the question of value is also a question of “causality” (how things enter being) and “agency” (the power to make change). Acquiring knowledge of the self or “soul” (the origin of which was considered Divine) was connected with “action” (the power to make change). Determining a person’s worth or value was essential to making and maintaining the “good life” for all, that is, a life lead in accordance with Divine law (which in ancient Greece meant accepting a highly unequal slave society). Knowledge of value was therefore connected to “culture” and “pedagogy.”

Value is a layered historical discourse that has traditionally been used in culturalist theories to privatize the subject in the subject’s own experience. Experience is made the zone of “feeling” (the aesthetic) and placed in static opposition to rationality (knowledge of the object world) and morality (the practical realm of society and politics), as in Kant, for example. In the discourses of the Enlightenment, of which Kant’s writings are exemplary, aesthetic value was considered crucial for an understanding of the “free subject,” which had seemed to become overdetermined in philosophy up to that time because of the emphasis on “reason” as central to understanding, not least of all by Kant himself in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. If the project of Enlightenment was to liberate the subject from “self incurred tutelage,” as Kant put it in his *What is Enlightenment?*, and such freedom was defined solely from the point of view of the possession of a priori logical precepts, this did not seem to leave much room for understanding the self-motivations of individuals on which the bourgeois revolution pinned its democratic hopes of a more equal society than was then offered by feudal absolutism. In these terms, the aesthetic was considered a kind of knowing without concepts, a “purposiveness without a purpose” (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*), as Kant put it, that everyone equally possessed and exercised in judgments

of taste and which was considered to be prior to the logical understanding of things (science). "In all judgments by which we describe anything as beautiful," Kant explains, "we tolerate no one else being of a different opinion, and in taking up this position we do not rest our judgment upon concepts, but only on our feeling. Accordingly, we introduce this fundamental feeling not as a private feeling, but as a public sense" (*Critique of Judgment* §22). It was this *sensus communis* (or "common sense") that was supposed to found the free subject in German idealist philosophy in the period when the aesthetic first emerged as a disciplinary formation.

Inscribed in the idealist doctrine of the aesthetic is the notion that "experience" is a bedrock knowing that exists independently of conceptuality and which gives to knowledge its objects in sensual form. This set of assumptions taken over from empiricism inscribes a closely related idea about governance, which assumes that a social order most effectively constitutes itself (or not) to the degree that it successfully incorporates the "hearts" as well as the "minds" of its subjects by getting them to identify the realization of their desires with its reproduction. The founding discourse of the aesthetic in the Enlightenment thus contained a contradiction: on one hand, it argued that sensual immediacy was prior to knowledge and unavailable to the rule of reason, and, on the other, that such an irrational knowing was the basis of the social consensus on which the ideal State was founded. In later more Romantic writers, this contradiction was exploited and the aesthetic was valorized over science as the source of freedom. An appreciation of the "poetic" qualities of language and representation were then considered more important than the earlier attempt to locate the aesthetic in the order of reason, which was seen as necessary for basing politics on rational principles of governance, as Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* tried to do. Freedom came to be defined exclusively in terms of "taste" or "culture" rather than the rigors of scientific inquiry or the "excesses" of democracy, such as the French and Haitian revolutions, whose instrumental manipulations of the natural and traditional orders were seen as tied to the horrors of modernization by the ruling classes.

This brief look at the question of aesthetic value is a necessary precondition, to my mind, in understanding a labor theory of culture. For one thing it helps to show that the aesthetic has always been the site of ideology and is not a spontaneous form of knowing that comes from experience. In other words, a labor theory of culture shows how the specificities of experience that are described as aesthetic because they demarcate a zone of knowing free of conceptuality is in actuality

a historically produced way of knowing tied to social relations. My point in this brief excursus has not been to provide a genealogy of “value” but to give some indication of its connection to a series of concepts with which it is related philosophically in the Western humanist tradition. My reason for doing so is because the question of value—which is the question in theory of what has priority, “ideality,” or “materiality”—is not simply an epistemological issue about “how” meaning is constructed (as in post-structuralist discourses), nor is it a question about what matters to people (as the cultural common sense leads us to believe), but is at root the question of what makes the social and why (labor). Humanist cultural theory assumes that the social is an effect of ideas, expressed in the exercise of “free choice” by individuals, and thereby naturalizes the free market in labor that makes profit for the ruling class and exploits workers. The discursive cultural theory, although it problematizes the humanist theory by showing how the subject is always mediated through cultural systems, ultimately reinscribes the ideological function of humanism in the way it makes culture into a self-enclosed regime of signification. The “materiality” of culture as textuality is not very different ideologically than the “autonomy” of the subject in humanism. Both separate culture from its material basis in the labor arrangements that metabolize nature and humanity. The reification of culture from labor relations in discursive cultural theory is the same in terms of its ideological function as the reification of the individual from his material basis in social production that is found in humanist thought. Materialist cultural theory provides a critique of the ideology of culturalist theory of the subject by implicating the subject in “the ensemble of social relations” (Marx “Theses on Feuerbach”), of which it is an effect, showing how what makes the subject is always tied to labor arrangements. Materialist theory explains language and mimesis as “reflection” of nature through social labor. Culture is a relay of material forces, especially labor relations (class).

The labor theory of culture in which basic economic laws of motion arising from class relations explain superstructural practices is dismissed by culturalist theory as “mimetic” and therefore conservative. Mimetic, that is, in the way Derrida, for instance, argues in his theorization of mimesis in “The Double Session” that “the whole history of Western philosophy” (191) depends on “a certain interpretation of *mimesis*” (183) that “implies that somewhere the being of something that *is*, is being imitated” (206) and so conceives of language as simply a “detour” through which “the element of the same, always aims at coming back to the pleasure or the presence

that has been deferred" ("Differance" 72). In his text Derrida problematizes the relation "between literature and truth" (177). Western philosophy since Plato has of course consistently subordinated the former (literature) to the latter (truth) on the assumption that the reflection of reality in human understanding given by philosophy is more essential than the appearances of things given in sense perception, which is imitated in art. In an initial move "Truth," Derrida argues, "has always meant two different things" ("Double Session" 192): "dialectics and ontology" (185). In other words, truth has never been singular and originary as defined in essentialist terms because although truth has always been defined as referring to "things as such" (185), on the one hand, or, in other words, as a "sole standard of measurement" through recourse to which "one can always decide" what "is or is not true" (185), on the other hand it has as well been understood self-reflexively or discursively as "the truth of truth" (192), or "the history of the essence of truth" (192), that is as contingent and dialectical, within the very same tradition. Derrida thereby shows that the difference within Western philosophy between the dialectical and ontological conception of truth has been covered over by "classical semiology" or "mimesis," of which Plato's writings are exemplary, which makes "the substitution of the sign for the thing... both *secondary* and *provisional*" ("Differance" 61). By considering ontology and dialectics a "difference" in the order of truth rather than a consequence of the material dependence of knowledge on the objective world (*mimesis*), Derrida makes difference (the structure of knowledge) rather than reference (the authority of experience) "originary" (62). In other words, by uncovering the "two different things" that "truth" has always stood in for in Western philosophy that remains hidden by a mimetic theory of language in which the sign is always assumed to be "secondary and provisional" in relation to the true, Derrida shows how truth is always differential (or dialectical in the classical terminology) and not referential (or ontological) in its origins. But the deconstruction of truth set out in "The Double Session" is not simply the uncovering of difference at the origin that has been sutured over by essentialism, because the act of revealing itself effects a reversal of the order of priority between dialectics (signs, writing, culture) and ontology (things, speech, nature) as authorized by mimesis. Whereas mimesis places nature as originary and writing or art in a secondary position as its imitation, such reversal demands conceiving the contrary to be true, that experience does not provide the truth of the world but is itself a cultural inscription.

However, Derrida argues for going beyond such a necessary reversal calling it merely an “apparent” inversion (192) of Platonism that shares “the same root” (“Double Session” 192) with it, and he associates such an apparent reversal with aesthetics, the view that “strongly stressed that art, as imitation (representation, description, expression, imagination, etc.) should not be ‘slavish’ . . . and that consequently . . . art can create works that are more valuable than that which they imitate” (192). Derrida’s deconstruction of the order of truth that conceptually organizes Western culture is thus not to be understood as a materialist inversion of idealism that places language in the primary position and understands concepts as superstructural. He actually maintains that “any attempt to reverse mimetologism or escape it in one fell swoop by leaping out of it *with both feet* would only amount to an inevitable fall back into its system” (207) by maintaining the dialectic between “writing” (as mimesis) and “reality” as the “outside” of representation. However, the explanation of the referential conception of language (mimesis) as a form of difference makes the dialectic of truth, the history of philosophy and writing generally, which Derrida reveals to be the cultural figuration of the true, more important than inquiry into “things as such” or ontology. However, besides being simply mimetic and subordinate to an idealized understanding of nature as it has been in the idealist tradition since Plato, ontology has also been dialectical and concerned itself with the social interaction of labor and nature. Rather than a materialist inversion that would provide a critique of idealism from outside its premises, Derrida argues for an awareness of the “materialism of the idea” (207) of “value” as a certain opacity of conceptuality inscribed in the order of signification of Western culture that has served an essentially reproductive function to police the boundaries of knowledge. In Mallarmé’s *Mimique*, for example, Derrida finds not simply the reversal of mimesis that installs figuration as the basis of intelligibility, but also the preservation of its structure “without its Platonic or metaphysical interpretation . . . that always implies that somewhere the being of something that *is*, is being imitated” (206), as in Mallarmé’s text “the mime imitates nothing” (194). Because the mime performs an imitation without reference to an original, in other words, “we are faced with mimicry imitating nothing . . . a reference without a referent” (206). Writing is thus understood as mimesis without reflection, a “speculum” that “reflects no reality” but rather “produces reality-effects” (206) while performing the structure of reference in which it appears that reality is being imitated or reflected. But by identifying materiality with that which is opaque to consciousness, Derrida also



contains a critique from the historical outside of culture, which is the structure of labor relations and its necessary ideological reflection.

Derrida brackets the socioeconomic function of Platonism and considers it in purely epistemological terms, which are expanded in such a way that the traditional understanding of concepts as referring to things themselves is disrupted and these concepts are treated materially as the things in themselves, which delimit thinking, thereby producing an immanent awareness of the coercive basis of thought. The classical representation of "representation" (mimesis) is, of course, a highly value coded mediation on representation in which knowledge is considered necessary for acquiring that which gives men mastery of nature for the social good. However, Platonism is not strictly an epistemological matter. At root it is economic.

The Platonic separation of "reason" (logos) and "materiality" (appearance) was not simply a cultural bias inscribed in the structure of philosophy but a reflection within theory of the class structure of ancient society in which the socially necessary labor was carried out by slaves at a low level of technological capacity.<sup>1</sup> The "logocentrism" of Plato is actually the result of the undeveloped economic structure of slave society, which did not allow for a view of culture in other than vulgar materialist terms as little more than instrumental working upon raw materials. The rudimentary transformation of nature produced the view of knowledge as changeless and fixed, as well as beyond the mundane world, because there was not yet an economic incentive to augment wealth through technical innovation. The modern "reversal of Platonism" Derrida dismisses as merely aesthetic also reflects changes in the division of labor. With economic development and more complex division of labor it became impossible by Kant's time, for instance, to maintain a simple distinction between "logos" and social praxis. And this was reflected in shifts within humanist theory, in the demotion of "reason" and the new valorization of the "aesthetic" and emotional, most notably in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), for example. By the time Kant writes his third critique the socialization of wage-labor and the production of capital had revolutionized humanity's relationship to nature, placing such a premium on innovation that "modernity" was seen as a threat to "reason" and as the unleashing of "irrational" forces, such as "democracy" (rule by the majority). Kant attempted to harness these material forces by providing "reason" a more material foundation than the ancient canon allowed. He argued that the a priori rules of reason, which his own *Critique of Pure Reason* itself understood as "transcendental" categories, were ineffectual without an

understanding of their anchorage in the manifold of sense perception (what for Plato was the origin of illusion), which Kant took to be the work of the "imagination" and found exemplified in aesthetic experience. If "reason" was not "free" of the material for Kant in the way that Plato assumed, his understanding of materiality was itself still highly reified. For Kant the "thing in itself" is *noumenal* and therefore only perceptible through mediation. The "medium" through which it appears is considered purely subjectively by Kant, as "categories" of understanding and the aesthetic apperception of "mere form." Such an understanding of materiality as the other of subjectivity reflects a high degree of social commodification in which labor is alienated from the producers and circulates as exchange value so that people can only fulfill their needs in an alienated way through the market, and in the process submit to being exploited. The subjective "freedom" of the human in the natural exercise of his "imagination" was in actuality a reflection of the submission of the worker to the regime of wage-labor, which gives him in place of socioeconomic agency the status of being an individual within culture as a passive consumer alienated from social praxis.

I understand Derrida's deconstruction and reinscription of mimesis as a purely epistemological problematic to indicate that what is at issue in the rejection of the labor theory of culture is not in actuality mimesis but rather about which theories go along with the dominant ideology and which do not. Derrida's theorization of difference represents itself as a more rigorously materialist critique of idealism than the labor theory of culture because it does not posit a Truth around which to organize its own authority but rather relies on a close reading of the act of signification itself that frames all linguistic claims. The labor theory of culture would thus seem to depend on a "referential" theory of language in which language is conceived instrumentally as referring to a reality independent of consciousness, which is thereby given transcendental status, what Derrida calls "Platonism" ("The Double Session" 191). "Platonism," according to Derrida, depends on the elision of the difference between two different figures of truth whose hierarchal ordering constitutes the story of Western philosophy. But, by remaining immanent to the cultural superstructure, Derrida repeats the dominant ideology of culturalism, which disconnects ideas from their class basis and thus naturalizes the existing. *Différance* is thus made a "general law" ("Differance" 67) that is held to be incontestable as such. Derrida inscribes the "outside" (the relation of labor to nature) in the "inside" (the binaries of figuration) and thereby reinscribes the cognitive as the limit text of knowing, a

move that is itself constitutive of Western metaphysics. His theory of difference informs the postmodern understanding that culture is material in itself (simulacral), which assumes that what at any time is considered natural and given the status of the real is an effect of signification. Such an assumption is not very different than the humanist one that nature is the origin of truth, in that both maintain the self-evidence of the world as it is, as the basis of knowing, by making intelligibility a purely formal matter of representation. There is not much difference between considering truth the site of "inscription" of the codes and conventions of culture, or considering it as the final "guarantee" of meaning, because both views place subjectivity above the material conditions of its production in class society.

Humanist cultural theory has changed since Kant's time, of course. For one thing it has come to define itself in more materialist terms. The conservative cultural critic Roger Scruton, for instance, represents an up-to-date humanist in so far as he positions himself as a materialist against "the idealist doctrine" that art is free of the political, "that art does not advise, describe or moralize" (*Aesthetic Understanding* 4). Such an idealist view as classical humanist theory assumed, he argues, cannot "lead us to a general aesthetics" (6) as it cannot serve "to demarcate the exact place of imaginative experience in the life of a rational being" (13). On the other hand, the value of culture is not a matter of its reflecting an "idea" that exists outside it either, according to Scruton. Rather, he argues that value is found immanently within culture, which he sees as a mode of signification bound up with the "abrogation of reference" (19) and "indeterminacy" (18) that he believes is more "true to life" (17) than true to fact (concept).

The "abrogation of reference" is, according to Scruton, more "true to life" than a theory that relates the aesthetic to "ideas" (the true-to-fact) or, more importantly, to "its origin in productive activity" (*Aesthetic Understanding* 8). For him, what explains the aesthetic is "not a property of the text itself" (19), nor is it a matter of "the economic conditions under which it is conceived" (8), rather it is a question of "the response of the observer" (28) who has come to possess "the requisite intellectual and emotional capacities" (28) and learned to appreciate the "penumbra of significance" (14) issuing from artistic "indeterminacy." In other words, the aesthetic is experiential and made the other of abstraction, a theory of the place of art in the totality, and is thus "material" for Scruton. And yet, at the same time, materiality is sentimentalized and considered a purely affective matter: "an education of the heart" (Scruton, *Guide to Modern Culture* 149).

Because capitalism is at root dependent on wage-labor, it is no surprise to find that discussion of value and what makes the social still takes the idealist form it assumed in ancient slave society that denies the basic class logic that underlies the cultural. Humanist cultural theory situates “value” exclusively within the superstructure of society in which the subject is hailed as a free agent of free market forces and occults the relation of this subject’s freedom and the unfreedom of the material base where the class antagonism between capital and labor is articulated. The result is an idealist theory of the social as constituted by the everyday agency of “desire” (an “education of the heart”) rather than “labor” (class consciousness). The subject of “desire” normalizes the status quo by valorizing singular acts of consumption that occult why whatever everyday pleasure there is for a few is connected to the coerced surplus labor of the many in what Marx calls the “Working Day” (*Capital* Vol. 1, 283–344).

Humanism as a whole makes a fetish of subjectivity and agency by cutting theory of the subject off from the social totality in ways that reflect the dominance of exchange value in capitalism; humanism thereby helps produce the mass dehumanization, inequality, and slavery that it usually defines itself in opposition to (especially in its modern forms such as in the Enlightenment or Romanticism). Although culturalism, strictly speaking, emerged as a critique of idealist cultural theories such as humanism—in the writings of Nietzsche and Heidegger, for example—it reinscribes the same ideological function that humanism served in previous moments of capitalism. Humanist cultural theory places man at the center of the world as the bearer of “reason” and marginalizes differences. It considers culture to be at once a monument testifying to the dignity of the individual and an archive of progress that gives the highest expression of his innate freedom. Humanism posits man as outside nature, and the result has been to see culture as “above” politics and economics.

Although its origins lie in ancient (pre-Socratic) Greek philosophy, humanism consolidates itself with the rise of capitalism in Europe and the beginnings of colonial conquest in the sixteenth century and receives further impetus with the spread of the world market in the eighteenth century. Its insistence on universal codes of knowledge and ethics helped establish a common market within the framework of European nation-states and it equated such a development with the goal of history itself. Under the impact of imperialism, however, humanism was implicated in the practices of oppression and barbarism it formally denounces. The crisis of humanism has led to its immanent critique in the discourses of postmodernism, which questions the

value of its central concepts such as universality, progress, and emancipation. And yet such critique is limited to teasing out the immanent contradictions of humanist discourse and therefore reinscribes the central logic of humanism, which posits culture as the other of class.

What makes the texts of Plato and Rousseau humanist is not simply, as Derrida has argued, because they maintain a logocentric binary in which writing is subordinated to “speech” (the “presence” of human experience). What makes humanism is not strictly an epistemological matter at all but is, at root, economic—humanism has always reified the division of labor and represented it in epistemological terms, as cultural differences. And yet, culture is always a reflection of the economic base. It is the division of labor (class), and not “différance,” “re-signification,” or “transvaluation,” that determines the meanings available in a society’s signifying practices. “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force” (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 67). It is one’s relation to the means of production or class position, in other words, that determines one’s access to culture and the means of representation, which, in turn, determines one’s place in the cultural series. In short, how “smart,” “good looking,” “reliable,” “trust worthy,” “literate,” and so on one is depends on one’s class position, which is what allows access to the practices that constitute such values.

Culturalist theory rejects the materialist theory of culture as “bad” epistemology—what Derrida calls “the tyranny of transparency”—on the grounds that it is blind to the materiality and agency of the signifier and therefore subordinates it to a secondary position in relation to a metaphysically privileged “transcendental signified” (Derrida). But it is itself “metaphysical” to claim that *différance* is “neither a word nor a concept” but the law of conceptuality, which only shows that the point is not what is or is not metaphysical but what is the political economy of metaphysics and whose interests does it serve. Because labor is held to be basic to a materialist cultural theory and used as an explanation of superstructural practices, it stands accused in discursive cultural theory of supporting what de Man calls “aesthetic ideology” on the grounds that the mode of intelligibility it authorizes collapses the phenomenal and the real as in referential theories of language. According to de Man, “ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism” (*Resistance to Theory* 11) that disguises “the linguistics of literariness” (11), which “more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics... is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking

of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence" (11). On such a view, the "rhetorical or topological dimension of language" (17), or, in other words, the "materiality of the letter" (de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* 90), represents the limit text of materiality, and because it is "impossible to maintain a clear line of distinction between rhetoric, abstraction, symbol, and all other forms of language" (49) it is thought to ground "the universal theory of the impossibility of theory" (*Resistance to Theory* 19). Because every "decoding of a text leaves a residue of indetermination that has to be, but cannot be, resolved" (15), such an antitheory theory is considered "subversive" (8) of all "totalizing (and potentially totalitarian)" (19) ways of thinking. The formal operations of language are assumed to be primary and material in discursivist cultural theory, and to argue for implicating language into the social division of labor is considered the mark of a totalitarian imposition on the differential logic of the social inscribed in the free play of signification where it is claimed that "whoever loses wins, and in which one loses and wins on every turn" (Derrida, "Différance" 72–3). If all reading is a matter of tropes then one text is as true as another, and rather than being a matter of social inequality the social is seen as a semiotic democracy where all are equal in relation to language. The attack on materialist cultural theory in terms of a semiotic democracy fails to engage with materialist theory through the relay of an epistemological ruse that displaces the question of materiality from social praxis to rhetoric, thus conflating material agency with the experience of "pleasure" that is held to be the effect of the opacity of errant tropes in a text that exceeds its normative meanings. The linguistic turn in cultural theory is deeply conservative because on its terms it becomes impossible to connect the inside of culture to its outside in class, which is necessary for explaining why life chances on the market are brutally determined by the structure of exploitation that sacrifices worker's needs to the pleasures of the capitalist while at the same time it gives to capitalism the alibi of the a-logic of desire and attributes to pleasure a universal significance, as demanded by consumerism. Nothing could be more comforting to the ruling class than such an antitheory *theory*, which turns the source of profit in unpaid labor into a trope of pleasure and pronounces all conflicts to be "undecidable" stalemates so that nothing need change. Différance is not immanent to language as such, however, rather such a view of language is itself an effect of the ratio of exploitation in which labor stands in a historically necessary relation to capital. It was not until the rising organic composition of capital produced the steep decline in the profit rate beginning in

the mid-'70s that post-structural theory of language emerged and gained institutional legitimacy as a general cultural theory. The pan-insidism of language and the "death of the subject" reflect the degree to which labor has been subordinated to capital on a global scale. In short, the labor relations explain the cultural logic and not the other way around. To assume the opposite is to "imagine false or seeming motive forces" in place of "the real motive forces," as Engels says.

The rejection of the labor theory of culture as "mimetic" also reveals the lack of engagement of the dominant theories of culture with the labor theory of culture, as can be seen when one turns to Lenin's understanding of culture as "reflection." Lenin's understanding of culture as "reflection" is not intelligible if one only sees in it the secondary issue of epistemology, the familiar question of how a text constructs meaning through (dis)simulation at the level of its immanent formal properties. Even such an otherwise careful reader of Lenin as Pierre Macherey argues in his *Theory of Literary Production* that Lenin's materialist understanding of writing as "reflection" is not effective because it fails to grasp the immanent "literariness of the text" (119), which for him is a matter of how the text performs "an internal displacement of ideology" (133) that resists "all attempts to 'demystify'" (133) it from its outside. Lenin, according to Macherey, by failing to grasp the immanent function of literature "to present ideology in a non-ideological form" (133), as a text must always "include an ideology—which by itself does not belong to it" (127), is thus a slave to the idea of historical "content" in the same way as "bourgeois criticism" (119) despite the oppositional use Lenin makes of its concepts. But it is Macherey who in this way is reinscribing the bourgeois ideology of the literary text by placing it in a zone held to be immune from ideology critique. The understanding of "reflection" in bourgeois criticism has always done this by focusing on the means of representation as determinate to the exclusion of the economic function of representation in the social. For Lenin, however, "reflection" is a recognition of the working of necessity behind all acts of knowledge production in which writing is implicated in social praxis. Writing, that is, as reflecting not the "free" consciousness of the writer as in humanist discourses, or the "excess" of "desire" as it is in culturalist theory, but rather as inserted into the dialectic of the social real (the class struggle). This is a reflection without mimesis: writing "reflects" the class struggle behind culture, of which writing itself has a more or less active part and is therefore in no way to be understood as a static and transparent reflection (as mimesis, verisimilitude, and naturalism, for example).

When Lenin reads Tolstoy, for example, he first emphasizes that by “reflection” he does not mean simple “mimesis,” a purely formal operation of adequation between the codes and conventions of language conceived as a pure medium of expression, a vessel of a timeless consciousness, or a mirror held up to a presumably static and inert reality:

To identify the great artist with the revolution which he has obviously failed to understand, and from which he obviously stands aloof, may at first sight seem strange and artificial. A mirror which does not reflect things correctly could hardly be called a mirror. (“Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution” 202)

Reflection, in Lenin’s terms, is thus not about the “transparency” of “meaning” (verisimilitude). It is about reading effects at the level of culture in terms of their more primary causes in an unfolding revolutionary social process, or, in other words, their “historical and economic conditions” (208). Furthermore, Lenin recognizes that “transparency” is not the issue, because what is being reflected is itself contradictory, that the historical and economic conditions themselves are conflicted such that any reflection is bound to be partial and to a certain extent distorting, as it must reflect partial and contrary class interests. At the same time, he does not fall into a liberal pluralism and dogmatic eclecticism by maintaining that the complexity of the real makes it finally impossible to have a true representation of things but argues for dialectics on the grounds that despite the fact that truth “is something we cannot ever hope to achieve completely” the continual approximations made toward it act as a “guard against mistakes and rigidity” and an “indicator of its connection with human wants,” its “use and *connection* with the surrounding world” (“Once Again”).

Lenin thus reads for social and ideological contradictions that militate against the ahistorical and abstract understanding of reflection as posited by (post)modern formalist reading strategies. What Lenin reads as a reflection is the way in which contradictions at the level of consciousness between Tolstoy’s “merciless criticism of capitalist exploitation,” on one hand, and “crackpot preaching of submission, ‘resist not evil’ with violence” (“Tolstoy” 205), on the other, for example—are tied to contradictions in the social relations:

The contradictions in Tolstoy’s views are not contradictions inherent in his personal views alone, but are a reflection of the extremely



complex, contradictory conditions, social influences and historical traditions which determined the psychology of various classes and various sections of Russian society in the post-Reform, but pre-revolutionary era. ("Leo Tolstoy" 325)

Lenin's materialist reading is not dependent on a naturalistic view of the text as a stylistic mode of reflecting on a static and fixed reality, whether located in the mind or in the material world. Rather, it directs reading to the interaction of the text as a locus of ideological struggles over the social real and the conflictual reality of social struggles in the ongoing material praxis of labor interacting with the objective world.

Contrary to the view that says a materialist cultural theory is disabling because it reduces "agency" (the agency of consciousness, the agency of the signifier, etc.) to a secondary position, the direct opposite is true. Without the recognition of the determination of culture (consciousness, affects, signification, and so on) by labor, what is called agency is really a symptom of reification, because a part of social reality is placed in the position of being the whole of reality, thus stabilizing the dominant order by protecting it from critique.

### WHAT IS ORTHODOX MARXISM?

The question of agency if it is not to be simply a code for free market volunteerism must engage the nature of the objective world that determines historic change and why the material world conditions what is socially possible. I argue that "agency" is not a matter of individuality in its bourgeois sense but a materialist question. More specifically, agency is a question of class. I am arguing, in other words, that the most rigorous theory of the subject has to be located in a class theory, and class itself has to be understood not in cultural terms but on a materialist and objective basis that goes beyond the logic of profit. Such a theory of agency will not only provide guidelines for collective action for reorganizing the existing social institutions and practices but will also have deep consequences for contemporary theory and cultural studies.

Any effective cultural theory therefore will have to do at least two things: it will have to offer an integrated understanding of social practices and, based on such an interrelated knowledge, offer a guideline for praxis. My main argument is that among all contesting cultural theories now only orthodox Marxism has been able to produce an

integrated knowledge of the existing social totality and provide lines of praxis that will lead to building a society free from necessity.

But first I must clarify what I mean by orthodox Marxism. Like all other modes and forms of political theory, the very theoretical identity of Marxism is itself contested—not just from non- and anti-Marxists who question the very “real” (by which they mean the “practical” as under free market criteria) existence of any kind of Marxism now but, perhaps more tellingly, from within the Marxist tradition itself. I will, therefore, first say what I regard to be the distinguishing marks of orthodox Marxism and then outline a short polemical map of contestation over orthodox Marxism within the Marxist theories now. I will end by arguing for its effectivity in bringing about a new society based not on human rights but on freedom from necessity.

I will argue that to know contemporary culture—and to be able to act on such knowledge—one has to first of all know what makes the existing social totality. The dominant social totality is based on inequality—not just inequality of power but inequality of economic access (which then determines access to health care, education, housing, diet, transportation, and so on). This systematic inequality cannot be explained by gender, race, sexuality, disability, ethnicity, or nationality. These are all secondary contradictions and are all determined by the fundamental contradiction of capitalism that is inscribed in the relation of capital and labor. All modes of Marxism now explain social inequalities primarily on the basis of these secondary contradictions and in doing so—and this is my main argument—legitimate capitalism. Why is this so? Because such arguments authorize capitalism without gender, race, discrimination and thus accept economic inequality as an integral part of human societies. They accept a sunny capitalism—a capitalism beyond capitalism. Such a society, based on cultural equality but economic inequality, has always been the not-so-hidden agenda of the bourgeois left—whether it has been called “socialism from below,” “new left,” “postmarxism,” or “radical democracy.” This is, by the way, the main reason for its popularity in the culture industry—from the academy (Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, and so on) to daily politics (Michael Harrington, Jesse Jackson, Ralph Nader, Michael Moore, and so on) to.... For all, capitalism is here to stay and the best that can be done is to make its cruelties more tolerable, more humane. This humanization (not eradication) of capitalism is the sole goal of *all* contemporary lefts (marxism, feminism, antiracism, queeries, and so on).

Such an understanding of social inequality is based on the fundamental notion that the source of wealth is human knowledge and not

human labor. That is, wealth is produced by the human mind and is thus free from the actual objective conditions that shape the historical relations of labor and capital. For David Harvey, for example, class is immaterial: “value is immaterial but objective,” he writes, or, in other words, class “can be judged only in terms of its objective consequences” as “it is impossible to measure a social relation directly” (“An Exchange” 214). Class is a cultural “fiction” and its materiality is made into a pragmatic issue, like a marketing gimmick, about who has the most effective definition about what matters to people. This is another relay of the “class-as-process” theory of those who have made their careers by *rethinking* Marxism, such as Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, who argue that class is “overdetermined” (114) and not “dichotomous” (112) since class is an aftereffect of “producing and appropriating surplus labor” (*Knowledge and Class* 52). Because there is always the production and appropriation of a surplus, even in communist societies where the workers work for themselves, class is an eternal fact of life that cannot be abolished. Class is eternalized by Resnick and Wolff by their making the individual’s relation to the work process the material basis of class. The only difference that matters is not where one stands in the social relations of production—whether one owns capital and exploits the labor of others or whether one owns nothing but labor-power and must submit to being exploited by the owners—but whether one’s experience of work is alienated or not—does one work but does not possess the result, or the opposite? Class, in short, is a matter of how one relates to the use of the surplus (consciousness), not the social relations of exploitation (existence) and how this shapes consciousness. Only orthodox Marxism recognizes the materialism of labor and its primacy as the source of all human wealth, including culture and consciousness. I argue that any emancipatory theory has to be founded on recognition of the priority of Marx’s labor theory of value and not repeat the technological determinism of corporate theory (“knowledge work”) that masquerades as social theory, which always assumes that it is “the consciousness of men that determines their existence” (Marx, *Contribution* 21).

Finally, it is only orthodox Marxism that recognizes the inevitability and also the necessity of communism—the necessity, that is, of a society in which “from each according to their ability to each according to their needs” (Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme”) is the rule because of the law of value:

Along with the constant decrease in the number of capitalist magnates, who usurp and monopolize all the advantages of this process of

transformation [the centralization of the means of production, its scientific organization, and the socialization of labour on a world scale], the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, and exploitation grows; but with this there also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united, and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production. (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I 929)

A parody of politics has taken over left politics in the United States and Europe. A parody in which—after the dead end of the designer socialisms of post-marxisms—suddenly *everyone* is an “orthodox” Marxist: from Žižek who writes of the need to “return to the centrality of the Marxist critique of political economy” (*Reader* ix); to Michael Sprinker who referred to himself as a “neo-conservative marxist” (“Forum” 68). In calling himself a “neoconservative,” Sprinker was embracing with pride Butler’s definition of the term in her “Merely Cultural,” in which she equates it with “leftist orthodoxy” (268). Then there is Paul Smith who, after mocking orthodox Marxism in *Discerning the Subject* and *Universal Abandon*, now says he has a “fairly orthodox understanding of what Marx and the Marxist tradition has had to say about capitalism” (*Millennial Dreams* 3).

Parody is always the effect of a slippage, and the slippage here is that in spite of the sudden popularity of “orthodox” Marxism, the *actual* theories and practices of the newly orthodox are more than ever before *flexodox*. It seems as if once more Lenin’s notion that when the class antagonism emerges more sharply “the liberals . . . dare not deny the class struggle, but attempt to narrow down [and] to curtail . . . the concept” (“Liberal and Marxist Conceptions of the Class Struggle,” 122) has been proven by history.

“Orthodox” Marxism has become the latest cover by which the bourgeois left authenticates its credentials and proceeds to legitimate the economics of the ruling class and its anti-proletarian politics.

Take Paul Smith, for example. In classical Marxism, class is the central issue. (I put aside here that in his writings, on subjectivity, for example, Smith has already gotten rid of the “central” by a deconstructive logic.) What Smith does with class is a rather interesting test of how Marxism is being used to legitimate the class interests of the owners. Smith reworks class and turns it into a useless Habermasian communicative act. He writes that “classes are what are formed in struggle, not something that exists prior to struggle” (*Millennial Dreams* 60). To reiterate: the old ideological textualization of the “new left” is not working any more (just look at the resistance against globalization), so the ruling class is now reworking the “old left” to

defend itself. Against the classical Marxist theory of class, Smith evacuates class of an objective basis in the extraction of surplus labor in production and makes it the effect of local conflicts. In short, Smith reverses the classical Marxist position that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (Marx, *Contribution* 21), and he turns it into a neo-marxist view that what matters is their consciousness. In this he in fact shares a great deal with conservative theories that make "values" (the subjective) as what matters in social life and *not* economic access.

Žižek provides another example of the flexodox parody of Marxism today. Capitalism in classical Marxism is explained as a historical mode of production based on the privatization of the means of subsistence in the hands of a few, that is, the systemic exploitation of labor by capital. Capitalism is the world-historic regime of unpaid surplus labor. In Žižek's writings, capitalism is not based on exploitation in production (surplus labor) but on struggles over consumption ("surplus enjoyment"). According to Žižek all struggles are "surplus" struggles, at the root of which is the class struggle over surplus value ("Repeating Lenin"), which gives the form to the cultural struggles beyond the economic struggle and makes it impossible to ideologically close the gap between "what is" (inequality) and what "should be" (democracy). Class struggle, in short, is the "absent cause" (Althusser, *Reading Capital*) at the center of existence that generates ideological "solutions" but that itself "eludes symbolization" and explanation. The question for Žižek is how to figure this gap between the "symbolic" surface conflicts and the underlying structural contradiction of capitalism in such a way as to resist its recuperative suturing in the Symbolic edifice of the culture, a strategy he calls "Bartleby politics" (i.e., "I prefer not to" repeat the ideology). In other words, his project is how to "resist" attachment to a "big Other" or "grand narrative" of history that would seem to "guarantee" a progressive outcome and thereby promote the usual politics that support the system rather than provoke a "leap of faith" outside the logic of history.<sup>2</sup> Žižek thus opposes "traditional history" with "effective history," as in Foucault's reading of Nietzsche ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History"), which dissolves the ongoingness of labor in the "event" (reversal of values). What this does to the concept of class in Žižek's writings is crucial for understanding their ideological function.

Žižek turns class into a marker of cultural status. His "class" is not a matter of "oppressor and oppressed" (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*) but of "inclusion and exclusion" from the

dominant culture: "slum dwellers... are 'free' in the double meaning of the word even more than the classic proletariat ('freed' from all substantial ties; dwelling in a free space, outside the police regulations of the state)" ("Ecology"). His writings have become so popular on the left theory market because of the way they turn class from an economic structure of inequality to an empty political trope ("the part of no-part") that whitewashes exploitation and alibis capitalism. His answer to social injustice and inequality is, as in market criteria, how to construct an "effective" (non-recuperative) understanding of class by representing class as the disavowed desire toward, and perverse pleasure in, the excluded, rather than alienated labor and unmet need. In other words, class as a site of surplus enjoyment in the culture in which the term is either invested with negative or affirmative pleasure rather than class as a matter of who is clothed, fed, housed, healthy, and why. In this way he makes class into a market identity as in bourgeois sociology. On one hand, class is a negative Real that eludes symbolization at the level of culture ("the part of no-part," *Tragedy* 99) and, on the other, it is a positive call to action to struggle against the privatization of the "commons" (what he calls communism) on the part of "egalitarian collectives" united by the categorical imperative that "truth is partial" ("Repeating Lenin") rather than "neutral." In terms of ideology, what this situating of class in relation to culture rather than production entails is the insistence that behind the symbolic humanization and naturalization of capitalism as the horizon of struggle ("Ecology") is an "inhuman" excess ("the materiality of ideology"), a death drive implanted in human beings by the market that produces a "surplus pleasure" to be found in the sacrifice of one's normal identity as a consumer and symbolic rebirth as an ethical subject. The contemporary for Žižek represents the moment when the inhuman drive of capitalism that enslaves the individual to the loop of desire and prioritizes it before the social good is extended into the Symbolic (the cultural sphere). This puts it up for contestation and resignification in ways that may challenge the consumerism and technocratic reason of the dominant ideology such as to make possible a truly authentic ethical act (Badiou's "communist hypothesis") to commit oneself to the overthrow of capitalism.

Žižek's understanding of the outside is also not outside but inside, what he calls the ethical Act, or, following Badiou, "fidelity to the event" or the "idea of communism" (i.e., defense of the cultural commons), which makes class into a marker of different lifestyles: the "working class" is thus a plurality of market identities that consists of "intellectual laborers, the old manual working class, and the outcasts,"

each with their own “identity politics” (“multiculturalism”/“populist fundamentalism”/“gangs”) formed in response to the State’s policies of “privatization” that “desubstantialize” the “commons” (the “general intellect” *Tragedy* 147) and thus make them “free...to invent some mode of being-together” (“Ecology”).

Žižek’s opposition to the postmodern left that fetishizes a sublime otherness and democracy-to-come is finally not so radical, because he represents capitalism as an “inhuman” drive that nullifies the revolutionary agency of the proletariat as the material critique of what exists, as “the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things” (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 57). Žižek rejects what he calls the “old” and “naïve” theory of surplus value of Marx (*Tragedy*), and in place of Marx’s class theory of culture Žižek puts his own cultural theory of class as a matter of who is included/excluded from the hegemonic form of “enjoyment.” He claims that the proletariat no longer exists as the mass of workers exploited at the point of production and that Marx’s theory of value as the exploitation of labor is out of date (*Tragedy* 145) because there is no more exploitation now that knowledge is the source of value (“general intellect”) and profit is not made from surplus labor but “rent” (of copyrighted software, for example).<sup>3</sup> Leaving aside that what he is describing is actually double profit—not only does the capitalist own the labor but also the wages to access it—in place of the working class as the revolutionary subject Žižek instead places those he calls “toxic subjects,” “outcasts,” or “slum dwellers” (“Without Masters”), who are excluded from authentic recognition by the culture because of what in effect he considers their cynical non-affirmative consumption, which he romanticizes as “Bartleby politics.” Žižek rewrites “class” in cultural terms as comprising those who are not “included” in the “symbolic social substance” (“commons,” “general intellect,” i.e., culture) and whose exclusion becomes its own source of pleasure (“‘freed’ from all substantial ties...they have to invent some mode of being-together,” “Ecology”). These are not subjects of history whose agency is material because of the structure of capitalism, as in orthodox Marxist theory. They are free subjects understood as antihistorical (spiritual), a “third way” against the class struggle between exploiters and exploited, who act spontaneously in the market as counter-hegemonic ethical agents who never question the exploitation of labor by capital at the root of capitalism but simply question its ideological hegemony because they feel alienated from it. In short, they are individuals who see themselves as free agents, as in bourgeois ideology.

For all his denouncing of “resistance” politics (Laclau, Butler, Critchley) that fundamentally accepts capitalism as the silent and unquestioned “background,” Žižek’s notion of politics is finally no different. It amounts to resisting the privatization of the “commons,” which in his writings means resisting the “private” (instrumental) use of reason by the State (citing Kant), so that the “immediate universal” substance (“general intellect”) may display itself unhindered, without representation and regulation, as a screen on which to project more “authentic” images of surplus enjoyment. In short, like the Tea Partiers, he wants to deregulate the economy and misrecognizes this act as an act of freedom. His insistence on the “materiality of ideology” as the limit of the possible is done so as to figure movement to the outside in voluntarist terms, as simply opting out (“I prefer not to”) or “demanding the impossible” (as in the old ’68 slogan). It is the lack of a materialist theory of value that leads Žižek, like Negri and Hardt, into spiritualism and voluntarism as a political strategy and embrace of bourgeois ideology. Žižek fetishizes the “encounter with the Real” as identification with that which is not yet culturally “schematized” and thereby holds out the hope of an alternative schematization; “When the normal run of things is traumatically interrupted the field is opened up for discursive ideological competition” (*Tragedy* 17). But what is ruled out by such an adventurist cultural politics of the spectacle is the advancing of a revolutionary politics based on the struggle over material resources and meeting people’s needs.<sup>4</sup>

How he “surpasses” Negri and Hardt on the patriotic left is by saying that it is those who are excluded from the commons of “general intellect” that are revolutionary and not those who participate in it by producing new ideas of sociality (*Multitude*). These “outcasts” are the ones whose consumption does not add value—because it does not affirm the political ideology of ethical capitalism through which products are marketed today—and therefore does not support the “new” cultural capitalism, which unlike the “old” capitalism is based not on surplus labor but surplus pleasure. By withholding their affirmation, they practice a cynical consumption that then marks them symbolically for exclusion (as “toxic subjects,” “outcasts,” “totalitarian,” “terrorists,” etc.). This is of course a meta-cynical theory that spontaneously finds in the “disaffected” style of consumption a ready-made model of revolution without the need for theory (“I prefer not to”). But “without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement” (Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* 25).



Žižek is playing with the concrete surfaces of meaning in the culture that on his own terms is a way to “privatize the commons” and justify an ethical capitalism—the value Žižek adds to the “general intellect” is the idea that cynical (non-affirmative) consumption spontaneously undermines capitalism, which simply makes its peace with the ongoing exploitation of labor embodied in the commodity. The “idea of communism” he defends (following Badiou) is a romantic sublime indebted to Heidegger’s ethos of “letting being be,” which, like the “refusal of work” doctrine of the autonomist marxists, is a theology of crisis in which the “weak” are represented as “strong in spirit” and there is abandonment of the class struggle of the exploited (labor) against the exploiter (capital). On this logic “the poor are actually extraordinarily wealthy” (Negri and Hardt, *Multitude* 131) because “despite the myriad mechanisms of hierarchy and subordination” they are “creative” and “express an enormous power of life” (129), or, in Žižek’s terms, “‘freed’ from all substantial ties” they are “‘free’ . . . to invent some mode of being-together” (“Ecology”). Unlike Hardt, Negri, and Starbucks, however, Žižek does not insist that spiritual values necessarily lead to a good society, because there are no guarantees that it will (now that history has been “desubstantialized”), and it may just as well strengthen the State. When one considers the role of the State in the “authoritarian capitalism” he locates in China, the normalization of which he sees as inevitable, his passionate embrace of “the Cross of the postrevolutionary present” (*Parallax View* 5) as an example of how the “highest” is the “lowest” (Hegel’s “infinite judgment”) is particularly cynical, hence the Gulag jokes at the expense of his “enemies,” as if to say “I am not really serious, I would not really incarcerate and indoctrinate you, like them.” But the jokes are serious; they signal the cynical belief in an eternal capitalism and are a mark of class-belonging among those who are engrossed in inventing pleasures above and beyond the struggle over material need, which they are allowed to enjoy because they consume the labor of the other.

Žižek finds in the indirect style of deconstruction in which materiality is reduced to textuality a hidden belief in substantial “reality” that indicates its silent complicity with the dominant ideology, what he calls “objective belief.” Objective belief functions by taking the subject out of the picture as if the real simply exists without the active participation of subjects who normalize the social real precisely by disavowing the complicity of their local pragmatic attempts to ameliorate things through such mechanisms as activism, charity, and ethical consumption, which support the status quo. But how empowering is

Žižek's counterstrategy of embracing the "monstrosity of Christ" and "Bartleby politics" as marginalized figures of nonparticipation in the dominant ideology who embody the self-sacrificing ideals of egalitarian collectivity by "doing nothing" but "thinking" during moments of social crisis? His reversal of Marx's eleventh thesis that the philosophers have already interpreted the world but the point being to change it—"the first task today is precisely not to succumb to the temptation to act...but to question the hegemonic" ("Repeating Lenin")—leaves intact the idealist notion that it is supposed to be the formula of an ethical calling (i.e., Badiou's "fidelity to the Event") and not what it actually is, the materialist recognition that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx, *Contribution* 21). Žižek's view is exactly the opposite and believes that by "merely combating the phrases of this world" (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 36) he is changing it, or, as he puts it, "When the normal run of things is traumatically interrupted the field is opened up for discursive ideological competition" (*Tragedy* 17). Žižek's so-called dialectical materialism is really a version of Hegel's objective idealism in which ideas determine the material, which is why he rejects ideology critique as "a reduction of the higher intellectual content to its lower economic...cause" (*Parallax View* ix) for immanent critique that aims at "the inherent decentering of the interpreted text" by surfacing "its 'unthought'...disavowed presuppositions and consequences" (ix). Thinking the unthought and disavowed is made more important than surfacing the determination of thought in the social totality (class). His understanding of "class" as inclusion/exclusion in the "social substance of ideology" is itself a dissimulation of class privilege in that it assumes the world is shaped by ideas, the material by the immaterial, as in all bourgeois ideology.

What people think and believe, however, whether it is the dominant ideology or revolutionary ideas, are always a reflection of the class relations that determine the limits of the possible. If the world appears determined by ideology, this is simply a result of the fact that in practice labor is itself "estranged" at the point of production, and what appears to be an equal exchange of labor for wages is in actuality the extraction of surplus labor from the worker by the capitalist. The objective appearance of the exchange of labor for wages in the market is itself already ideological and disguises the class inequality between capital and labor without the need of any more cultural reinforcement (such as "pleasure"), and this objective ideology that is daily reproduced in material practice can only be penetrated by

Marx's labor theory of value, which explains how what the worker sells to the capitalist is not her labor (a commodity like any other) but her labor-power (a special commodity that produces more value as it is consumed). Žižek's "surplus" theory of ideology in which ideology is made into a phantom value, a surplus pleasure beyond normal pleasure that he places as the object (*a*) of all struggles, does what bourgeois ideology has always done, which is to disguise the outright theft of labor-power by the capitalist, not in the everyday surfaces of consumption but daily at the point of production, in the "workday" (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, 340–411).

On Žižek's view, class is thus a "sublime object" of ideology, with all of its religious aroma, rather than the material basis of what exists. Desire and not need is at the center of the social. Desire not, however, as human but as inhuman. It is not, in other words, desire as it arises out of the social relations through which men and women meet their needs, but desire as a trope to mark the fact that his analytics remains immanent to the dominant ideology of compulsory consumption (the law of enjoyment). Desire is "inhuman" because Žižek considers it a "compulsive" force that, pace Freud ("death drive"), negates the autonomy of the ego (will, reason, etc.). In this way "desire" is dehumanized—it is not understood as emerging from the social relations—and becomes an ideology or "false consciousness": a way to "imagine false or seeming motive forces" in place of "the real motive forces" that compel individuals (Engels, "Letters in Historical Materialism"). In short, Žižek's notion of death drive as the inhuman compulsion of desire is simply a mystification of "the silent compulsion of economic relations" (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I 899). It is libidinal economy masquerading as political economy.

Žižek's psycho-marxism does what bourgeois ideology has always done—maintain the bourgeois hegemony over social production by commodifying, through an aesthetic relay, the contradictions of the wages system. What bourgeois ideology does above all is deny that the mode of social production has a historic agency of its own, independent of the subject. Žižek's "return" to "orthodox" Marxism erases its materialist theory of desire—that "our wants and their satisfaction have their origin in society" (Marx, *Wage-Labour and Capital* 33) and do not stand in "excess" of it. In fact, he says exactly the opposite and turns the need for Marxist theory now into a phantom desire of individuals: he makes "class struggle" an effect of a "totalitarian" desire to polarize the social between "us" and "them" (using the "friend/enemy" binary found in the writings of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, *Ticklish Subject* 226).

What is basic only to orthodox Marxist theory, however, which is what enables it to produce class consciousness through a critique of ideology, is its materialist prioritization of “need” over “desire.” Only orthodox Marxism recognizes that although capitalism is compelled to continually expand the needs of workers because of the profit motive, it cannot at the same time satisfy these needs because of its logic of profit. “Desire” is always an effect of class relations, of the gap between the material level and historical potential of the forces of production and the social actuality of unmet needs.

In spite of their formal “criticality,” the writings of Smith and Žižek, and other theorists of designer socialisms such as Hennessy, Jameson, Hardt, and Negri, produce concepts that legitimate the existing social relations. The notion of class in their work, for example, is the one that now is commonly deployed in the bourgeois newspapers. In their reporting on what has become known as the “Battle of Seattle,” and in the coverage of the rising tide of protest against the financial institutions of U.S. monopoly capital that are pillaging the nations of the South, the bourgeois media represents the emergent class struggles as a matter of an alternative “lifestyle choice” (e.g., the *Los Angeles Times*, “Hey Hey, Ho Ho, Catch Our Anti-Corporate Puppet Show!”).<sup>5</sup> On this diffusional narrative, “class” is nothing more than an opportunity for surplus pleasure “outside” the market for those who have voluntarily “discarded” the normal pleasures of U.S. culture. It is the same “lifestyle” politics that in the flexodox marxism of Hardt and Negri is made an autonomous zone of “immaterial labor,” which they locate as the “real communism,” that makes existing society postcapitalist already so that revolution is not necessary (*Empire*). What is at the core of both the flexodox marxism and the popular culture of class as “lifestyle” is a depoliticization of the concepts of classical Marxism that neutralizes them as indexes of social inequality and reduces them to merely descriptive categories, which take what is for what ought to be. Take the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, for example. Bourdieu turns Marx’s dialectical concepts of “class” and “capital,” which lay bare the social totality, into floating “categories” and reflexive “classifications” that can be formally applied to any social practice because they have been cut off from their connection to the objective global relations of production. Bourdieu, in short, legitimates the pattern of class as “lifestyle” in the bourgeois media by his view that “class” is an outcome of struggles over “symbolic capital” in any “field.” I leave aside here that his diffusion of the logic of capital into “cultural capital,” “educational capital,” and the like is itself part of a depoliticization of the relation

between capital and labor and thus a blurring of class antagonism. What Bourdieu's "field" theory of class struggle does is segregate the struggles into so many autonomous zones lacking in systemic determination by the historic structure of property so that everyone is considered to be equally in possession of "capital" (ownership is rhetorically democratized), thus making socialist revolution unnecessary. What the reduction of "class" and "capital" to the self-evidence of local cultural differences cannot explain is the systemic primacy of the production of surplus value in unpaid labor, the basic condition of the global majority that determines that their needs are not being met and compels them collectively into class struggles.

Without totalizing knowledge of exploitation—which is why such dialectical concepts as "capital" form the basis of orthodox Marxist class theory—exploitation cannot be abolished. The cultural idealism of the depoliticized voiding of Marxist concepts fits right in with the "volunteerism" of the neoliberals and "compassionate" conservatives that they use to justify their massive privatization programs. Considering class struggle politics as a matter of cultural struggles over symbolic status is identical to the strategy of considering the dismantling of social welfare as an opportunity for "local" agency freed from coercive State power, that is, the bedrock of the "non-governmental" activism and "community" building of the bourgeois reformists. When George W. Bush mobilized what he called the "armies of compassion" against the "Washington insiders" so as to return "power" to the "people," it was the old cultural studies logic that all politics is "people vs. power bloc," a warmed over popular frontism that makes politics a matter of building depoliticized cross-class coalitions for bourgeois right, utopic models of a post-political social order without class struggle possessing equality of representation that excludes the revolutionary vanguard. As Marx and Engels said of the "bourgeois socialists" of their day, such utopian measures "at...best, lessen the cost, and simplify the administrative work, of bourgeois government" ("Manifesto of the Communist Party"). Žižek's "affirmation" of revolutionary Marxism as a "totalitarian" desire that polarizes the cultural "lifeworld" between "friends" and "enemies" is another relay of "class-as-an-after-effect of 'struggle'" of the networked left. What the parody does is make class struggle a rhetorical "invention" of Marx(ists) analogous to the bourgeois "human rights" politics of the transnational coalitional regime of exploitation ruling today, and it erases the need for a global theory of social change. Orthodox Marxism cuts through the closed atmosphere of the "friends" of the networked left and their embrace of a voluntarist

“compassionate” millenarianism with a critique from outside so as to expose the global collective need for a revolutionary social theory and red cultural studies to end exploitation for all.

The hollowing out of Marxism in the name of (orthodox) Marxism by such theorists as Smith, Sprinker, and Žižek is based on the ideological unsaid of the bourgeois right of property and its underpinning logic of the market that are represented as natural (“inalienable”) “human rights,” or more commonly, in daily practices, as individual rights. Revolutionary struggles against these “rights” (of property) are assumed to be signs of dogmatism, ruthless impersonality, vanguardism, and totalitarianism—all “obvious” markers of orthodox Marxism. The remedy put forward by these theorists is to resist the revolutionary vanguard in the name of “democracy from below,” which is itself a code phrase for “spontaneity.” Spontaneity—the kind of supposed “freedom” that is the fabric of bourgeois daily life—is itself a layered notion that, in its folds, hides a sentimentalism that in reality constitutes “democracy from below” and its allied notion of the “individual,” and the “human subject.” Žižek and other “high theorists” manage to conceal this naïve emotionalism in the rather abstract language of “theory.” What is subtly implicit in the discourses of “high theory,” however, becomes explicit in the annotations of middle theory—that is, in bourgeois cultural commentary and criticism. Hennessy’s *Profit and Pleasure* is the most recent and perhaps most popular attack on orthodox Marxism in the name of Marxism itself.

On this view, orthodox Marxism is dogmatic and totalitarian. So, to “correct” its “faults,” Hennessy empties its revolutionary vanguard of its commitment and puts feeling (manifested by “heartache”) in its place. What is, of course, so significant is that Hennessy installs such sentimentality as the ultimate layer of her Marxism in the name of Marxism itself. This is what makes the work of bourgeois writers like Žižek, Smith, Sprinker, and Hennessy effective and welcome in the academy and the culture industry: they do not (like regular right-wingers) attack Marxism but they reduce its explanatory power and its revolutionary force by substituting spontaneity for revolutionary praxis. For these writers social transformation is the effect not of revolutionary praxis but of a spontaneous and emotionally intense exchange between two kindred “spirits.” It is the spirit that moves the world. What in Hennessy is presented as Marxism or feminism turns out to be a souped-up version of the old bourgeois cultural feminism that, running away from revolution, retreats once again into community, spontaneity, affectivity, and above all the autonomous subject

who gives and receives love above and beyond all social and economic processes.

One of the ways such writers hollow out Marxism of its Marxism and produce a Marxism beyond Marxism is by their overt acknowledgement of the way Marxism is treated in the bourgeois culture industry. Hennessy, for example, writes that Marxism in English departments (the trope of the culture industry) is both “courted and tamed” (*Profit and Pleasure* 2). In other words, by announcing her awareness of the way that Marxism is tamed, she hopes to inoculate herself from the charge that she is doing so. The message the reader is supposed to get is this: because she knows Marxism is always being “tamed,” she herself would never do that. Under cover of this ideological self-inoculation, Hennessy then goes on to produce her “tamed” version of Marxism that is only metaphorically “Marxist” because it is void of all the concepts and practices that make Marxism Marxism.

My larger point is, of course, that the most effective writings for the ruling class are located in the middle register, in that register of writing usually praised as lucid, clear, jargon-free, and, above all, “readable.” Žižek is abstract; Hennessy is concrete. This is another way of saying that the work of Hennessy and other such “tamers” of Marxism is always a work of synthesis and consolidation—they make concrete the work of high theory; it is for this reason that their work forms the very center of the culture industry. Finally, to be clear, the question here is not to play a game of determining the “good” from the “bad” Marxism. What is good Marxism—what is effective in overcoming inequality—is determined by history itself. The question is whether what is being done actualizes the historical potential made possible by the development of the forces of production and thus brings about change in the existing social relations of production (overcomes class inequality), or whether it plays within the existing actuality and thus turns the limits of the actually existing into the very limits of reality as such. And in doing so, whether it reifies the present social relations of production. Flexodox Marxists such as Hennessy accept the proposition that capitalism is here to stay and thus reject as “impractical” any pressure put on the external supports of capitalism (capital and labor relations) and then work within capitalism—on the basis of community and emotional intensity—to make its ongoing process of the exploitation of the labor of the world’s workers more “humane” and tolerable.

Capitalism is, according to Hennessy’s soap-operatic leftism, something that one should always keep in mind but not seriously consider

overthrowing. She is too cynical to take even her own views seriously: "This means that eliminating the social structures of exploitation that capitalism absolutely requires and so violently enacts at the expense of human needs must be on the political agenda, at the very least as the horizon that sets the terms for imagining change" (*Profit and Pleasure* 232). Capitalist exploitation is a heuristic consideration, not a revolutionary imperative.

Beyond the theatrical moves of the bourgeois left, however, orthodox Marxism is emerging as the only understanding of the new global formations that lead to transformative praxis. Orthodox Marxism has become impossible to ignore because the objective possibility of transforming the regime of wage-labor into a system in which the priority is not profit but meeting the needs of all is confronted as a daily actuality. The flexodox left turns the emergent class struggles into self-enclosed struggles for symbolic power so as to represent class hegemony in the relations of production as capable of being changed through cross-class "coalitions" when in fact exploitation everywhere in the world is maintained by such coalitions that are losing their legitimacy and breaking apart under the weight of their own contradictions precisely because the class divide is growing under their rule and beyond their borders. Only orthodox Marxism demonstrates that the productive forces of capitalism have reached tremendous levels and have the ability to feed, clothe, and house the world many times over but are fettered by capitalism's existing social relations: its fundamental drive to privately consume the social resources of collective labor. That the left today has, in dramatic fashion, been forced to return (if only rhetorically) to orthodox Marxism marks the fact that the struggle to transform capitalism has reached a stage of development that necessitates a systemic theoretical basis for revolutionary praxis. The hegemonic left now wants to incorporate orthodox Marxism into its dogmatic coalitional logic as a discourse that depends for its identity on "class" as "real": which is a code for the "lived experience" or the transcendental ineffable politics (Lacan) of class as an outside inferred from the inside (the side of subjective "values") and as such held to be unavailable for positive knowing. Which is another way of saying that class is a matter of "interpretation," "negotiation," and "seduction," rather than production. What the resulting flexodox Marxism cannot explain therefore is that class

is not a matter of what this or that proletariat or even the proletariat as a whole *pictures* as its goal. It is a matter of *what the proletariat is in actuality* and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do. (*Marx-Engels Reader* 135)



Orthodox Marxism does not consist of raising “class” as a dogmatic banner of the “real,” but, rather, in the critique of false consciousness that divides the workers by occulting their collective interest, shifting the focus from their position in social production and by their *material* antagonism with the capitalist class. “Class as real” (a spectral agency) cannot explain, and therefore cannot engage in, the material process through which capitalism, by its very own laws of motion, produces its own “gravedigger” in the global proletariat. What the flexodox return to, and hollowing out of, the concepts of orthodox Marxism proves, among other things, is that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 67), and history progresses despite this ideological hegemony through the agency of labor. In short—“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”

Orthodox Marxism has become a test case of the “radical” today. Yet, what passes for orthodoxy on the left—whether like Smith and Žižek they claim to support it, or, like Butler and Rorty they want to “achieve our country” by excluding it from “U.S. Intellectual life” (“Left Conservatism II”)—is a parody of orthodoxy that hybridizes its central concepts and renders them into flexodox simulations. Yet, even in its very textuality, however, the orthodox is a resistance to the flexodox. Contrary to the commonsensical view of “orthodox” as “traditional” or “conformist” “opinions” is its other meaning: ortho-dox not as flexodox “hybridity” but as “original” “ideas.” “Original,” not in the sense of epistemic “event,” “authorial” originality, and so forth, but, as in chemistry, in its opposition to “para,” “meta,” “post,” and other ludic hybridities: thus “ortho” as resistance to the annotations that mystify the original ideas of Marxism and hybridize it for the “special interests” of various groups.

The “original” ideas of Marxism are inseparable from their effect as “demystification” of ideology—for example, the deployment of “class” that allows a demystification of daily life from the haze of consumption. Class is thus an “original idea” of Marxism in the sense that it cuts through the hype of cultural agency under capitalism and reveals how culture and consumption are tied to labor, the everyday determined by the workday: how the amount of time workers spend engaging in surplus labor determines the amount of time they get for reproducing and cultivating their needs. Without changing this division of labor, social change is impossible. Orthodoxy is a rejection of the ideological annotations: hence, on one hand, the resistance to orthodoxy as “rigid” and “dogmatic” “determinism,” and, on the other, its hybridization by the flexodox, as the result of which it has

become almost impossible today to read the original ideas of Marxism, such as “exploitation,” “surplus value,” “class,” “class antagonism,” “class struggle,” “revolution,” “science” (i.e., objective knowledge), and “ideology” (as “false consciousness”). Yet, it is these ideas alone that clarify the elemental truths through which theory ceases to be a gray activism of tropes, desire and affect, and becomes, instead, a red, revolutionary guide to praxis for a new society freed from exploitation and injustice.

Marx's original scientific discovery was his labor theory of value. Marx's labor theory of value is an elemental truth of Marxism that is rejected by the flexodox left as the central dogmatism of a “totalitarian” Marxism. It is only Marx's labor theory of value, however, that exposes the mystification of the wage system that disguises exploitation as a “fair exchange” between capital and labor and reveals the truth about this relation as one of exploitation. Only orthodox Marxism explains how what the workers sell to the capitalist is not labor, a commodity like any other whose price is determined by fluctuations in supply and demand, but their labor-power—their ability to labor in a system that has systematically “freed” them from the means of production so they are forced to work or starve—whose value is determined by the amount of time socially necessary to reproduce it daily. The value of labor-power is equivalent to the value of wages workers consume daily in the form of commodities that keep them alive to be exploited tomorrow. Given the technical composition of production today, this amount of time is a slight fraction of the workday the majority of which workers spend producing surplus value over and above their needs. The surplus value is what is pocketed by the capitalists in the form of profit when the commodities are sold. Class is the antagonistic division thus established between the exploited and their exploiters. Without Marx's labor theory of value one could only contest the aftereffects of this outright theft of social labor-power rather than its cause lying in the private ownership of production. The flexodox rejection of the labor theory of value as the “dogmatic” core of a totalitarian Marxism therefore is a not so subtle rejection of the principled defense of the scientific (i.e., positive and reliable) knowledge workers need for their emancipation from exploitation, because only the labor theory of value exposes the opportunism of knowledges (ideology) that occult this exploitation. Without the labor theory of value, socialism would only be a moral dogma that appeals to the sentiments of “fairness” and “equality” for a “just” distribution of the social wealth, which does the work of capital by

naturalizing the exploitation of labor under capitalism, giving it an acceptable “human face.”

It is only orthodox Marxism that explains socialism as a historical inevitability that is tied to the development of social production itself and its requirements. Orthodox Marxism makes socialism scientific because it explains how in the capitalist system, based on the private consumption of labor-power (competition), the objective tendency is to reduce the amount of time labor spends in reproducing itself (necessary labor) while expanding the amount of time labor is engaged in producing surplus value (surplus labor) for the capitalist through the introduction of machinery into the production process by the capitalists themselves to lower their own labor costs. Because of the competitive drive for profits under capitalism, it is historically *inevitable* that a point is reached when the technical mastery—the amount of time socially necessary, on average, to meet the needs of society through the processing of natural resources—is such that the conditions of the workers worsen relative to that of the owners, and it becomes an unbearable global social contradiction in the midst of the ever greater mass of wealth produced. It is therefore just as inevitable that at such a moment it becomes rational to socialize production and meet the needs of all to avoid the explosive social conflicts perpetually generated by private property than to maintain the system at the risk of total social collapse on a world scale. “Socialism or barbarism,” as Rosa Luxemburg put it, is the inevitable choice faced by humanity because of capitalism. Either maintain private property and the exploitation of labor in production, in which case more and more social resources will go into policing the growingly desperate surplus population generated by the technical efficiency of social production, or socialize production and inaugurate a society whose founding principle is “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme”) and “in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (“Manifesto of the Communist Party”).

The time has come to state it clearly so that even the flexodox opportunists may grasp it: Orthodox Marxism is not a free-floating “language-game” or “meta-narrative” for arbitrarily constructing local utopian communities or spectral activist inversions of ideology meant to seduce “desire” and “mobilize” (glorify) subjectivity—it is an absolute prerequisite for our emancipation from exploitation and a new society freed from necessity. Orthodox Marxism is the only global theory of social change. Only orthodox Marxism has explained why communism, under the system of wage-labor and capital, is not “an

ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself” but “the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things” (*German Ideology* 57) because of its objective explanation of and ceaseless commitment to “the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority” (“Manifesto of the Communist Party”) to end social inequality forever.

It is my understanding that by drawing out the ways in which culture is shaped by the developments of labor, a labor theory of culture works to connect the most pressing cultural questions to the economic and political structures that determine how people live their lives. This understanding is based on the recognition that labor is the “process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature” (Marx, *Capital* Vol I, 283). Culture is at root labor. Culture is always coextensive with the social relations men and women must enter into in order to live, and it participates in shaping these relations. As Marx explains:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway. (*Capital, Marx/Engels Collected Works* Vol. 35, 187)

The material dependence of human beings on nature in turn acts to shape human nature, and this “metabolism,” as Marx calls it, between the two is what establishes culture. Culture is thus at root the material realization of human purposes in the natural world necessary to support life itself at a given level of development.

As human beings realize their vital purposes in the natural world, they are also required, as Marx explains, to pay “close attention” to their own labor process and thus come to be aware of how it “determine[s] the mode of [their] activity with the rigidity of a law” (*Capital, MECW* Vol. 35, 187). Culture is thus not only the realization of human ends in the material world but also the awareness and internal compulsion of these ends themselves that we subjectively experience as needs. In other words, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it

under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire," 103). Culture is thus also the medium for the transmission of needs that have arisen under particular social circumstances and that are required to be satisfied, and which, in being realized, reproduce the social relations as well as compel further changes.

Such an understanding of culture as coextensive with the labor process presupposes the materiality of language. But this understanding of the necessary coexistence of language and social praxis demands that we understand its materiality historically and not as a self-enclosed system of signs. By "material," what I, therefore, do not mean is the body (Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*), the signifier (J. Hillis Miller, "The Work of Cultural Criticism in the Age of Digital Reproduction" in his *Illustration*), or the general resistance of language to conceptuality (Christopher Fynsk, *The Claim of Language: A Case for the Humanities*). Instead, by material I mean what Marx (*Capital* Vol. 1, 198; 290) calls "social metabolism"—the relations of labor, its circulation in society, and its relation with nature. Language is material not because the signifier exceeds all signifieds and therefore is a non-translatable "this-ness" that resists all abstract concepts, but because it is part of "social metabolism"—it is a form of labor: "language *is* practical, real consciousness that... only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men" (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 49). Language is material due to the "close attention" required by a growingly complex labor process that gives to it "the rigidity of a law" that is indispensable to social life. It is the relative rigidity of language that allows it to be a tool of scientific abstraction capable of being applied elsewhere than the location of its emergence, which helps produce new changes in nature. It is the coextension, but noncoincidence, of culture and the labor process that therefore distinguishes "science" as the kind of knowledge that is self-aware of the nonidentity of consciousness and the material world that determines it, and "ideology," the "false-consciousness" of real socioeconomic necessity, compulsion, and development.

The material changes effected by social labor in the abstract come to compel social changes, and the consciousness of the necessity of such changes and the need to bring them about is also cultural. Culture thus comes to have the function of planning future labor to bring about required changes that have arisen due to material changes that have been effected in the past. Culture, therefore, in its totality is the product of past labor, the awareness of present labor, and the

plan of future labor. In short, culture is the superstructural relay that is always coextensive with the ongoing necessity of labor. The labor theory of culture of Marx explains the historical specificity of culture (which emerges with socially abstract labor), the place of culture in the social totality of practices (as a superstructural relay determined by labor arrangements) as well as the necessity of culture for humanity (as scientific knowledge of progress).

It is the underlying dependence of human beings on nature that explains the emergence of culture as specifically a reflex of human labor. Marx gives a two-part answer for this that explains how and why. In the first place the labor theory of culture entails recognizing that

Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life. (*German Ideology* 37)

What this means is that “It is not the *consciousness* of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* 21). Before looking at the social productions of human beings we have to recognize the production whose product they are, which means looking at the material structures of nature and society that shape their lives. This first premise of a labor theory of culture is important because it clarifies a basic problem of cultural theory, which is the problem of how to objectively determine “value” given that it is always the evaluation of a subject. Marx argues it is possible to have a cultural theory at all because it is always possible to distinguish between “the economic conditions of production” (21), or, in other words, the “social metabolism” of humanity and nature, and “the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out” (21). Without such an awareness culture will be naturalized as a self-enclosed type of activity whose meaning is purely auto-referential that is assumed to give the rule to nature. In other words, without the recognition of the dependence of culture on nature, culture becomes sacralized and serves to mystify the place of humanity in the material world.

The second part of Marx’s explanation for how labor explains culture rather than the reverse entails recognizing that it is in fact a

necessary by-product of capitalism that we come to see culture as a thing in itself reified from the material conditions of its emergence. It is for this reason that in his discussion of “labor” Marx is very careful to avoid naturalizing the category by considering it only a concrete activity, or, on the contrary, as the essence of humanity as such (*Grundrisse* 100–8). Marx needs to be read literally in the quote given above: He is not saying that labor, tools, production, and economics distinguish humans from animals instead of consciousness, religion, or anything else you like, but rather that humans can be distinguished from animals by “anything you like” (including labor, tools, production, economics), but whatever that “thing” is, it must be understood in terms of objectified human life activity, or, human-species being, rather than, say, as purely a cognitive matter in order to “define” the “essence” of man. Labor is not, in other words, a “transcendental signified” that demands we see the world as a homologous type of activity or the sign of a singular meaning. Labor is simply a concept for how “the ensemble of the social relations” (Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”) is the ground that determines what makes “meanings” meaningful in the first place because it is that matrix of conditions over which we are always struggling and attempting to make sense. If this is inverted and labor is taken to mean just another word that attempts to give meaning to something that spontaneously resists conceptuality, then it is impossible to have any cultural theory or anything like an explanation of culture, and we are left with surface description and nominalism, the belief that names make the world, and both the world and the names are assumed to be free of history.

As Marx acknowledges elsewhere, labor cannot define the essence of man as “animals also produce” (“Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” 68) and “the life of the species, both in man and in animals, consists physically in the fact that man (like the animal) lives on organic nature” (67). Nevertheless, he maintains that human life activity is different than animal life activity because the life activity of animals is not “objectified” for them as it is for humans:

The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is *its life activity*. Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. (“Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” 68)

It is important to note that it is not the natural possession of “consciousness” that distinguishes human beings from the rest of animal life here—as, for example, Braverman maintains when he states that human labor is distinct in nature because the “directing mechanism is the *power of conceptual thought*, originating in an altogether exceptional central nervous system” (47)—but the alienated mode of activity, through which human beings produce their life as an “object,” of which they are thus made to be conscious, that does so. This objectification of life is, of course, a result of the fact that human labor transforms nature, including human nature, into objects (e.g., language as an adaptation of natural sounds for the purpose of communication) whereas animal life activity does not. The difference between the human and animal that Marx draws attention to is concretely demonstrable in the fact that “an animal forms only in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species” (“Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” 69). More importantly, however, it is also a criti(que)al distinction to make in order to produce awareness of the form this “estranged labor,” imposed by material necessity and productive of the “know how” to produce all life, takes under capitalism; the mode of production in which “all things are *other* than themselves” because “an *inhuman* power rules over everything” (110) due to the law of value that emerges from out of the commodification of labor. Objectification may be the basis of human life, but commodification is the objectification of human life itself that reduces the subject of labor herself into an object on the market that is consumed by another who owns the means of production, for personal gain. Capitalism thus “makes man’s species-life a means to his physical existence” (69) so that humanity “produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need” (68) rather than “produce in freedom” (68) from necessity. The result is that capitalism “humanizes” nature, turning it into useful objects, and in the process “dehumanizes” humanity by turning labor into work, a task undertaken by the worker for wages merely to maintain her physical existence and the existence of the capitalist.

The dependence on nature, which necessitates and explains culture, is what makes it possible to discuss objects of art, commodities, social practices, and discourses in the singular form of culture, and not the obvious fact that such activities carry meaning for the subject. Meaning is always a secondary effect of the social relations. The idea that discourse constitutes culture is a formalist move that belies the claim of a discourse theory of culture to respect the specificity of



culture, which is always a matter of “paying close attention,” as Marx puts it, to the interaction of the social labor process and the material world.

### MATERIALITY AS MIMETIC LETTERATION

I would like to pause here and focus briefly on Tom Cohen’s writings that are enthusiastic cheerleading for whatever happens to be the current wisdom in institutional theory, which they excitedly represent as the cutting edge of knowledge. His texts, to use business management writer Tom Peters’ term, are the “pursuit of Wow.” However, his “wows” are forced and his excitement is stale: they are mimetic echoes of a certain modernist poetics with its old-fashioned undertone of “*épater le bourgeois*,” which has become more comical than shocking in the age of absolute difference—the irony is, of course, that he does not seem to recognize that he is *the* bourgeois; his excitement about the “new” does not leave any room for self-reflexivity.

His writings are mostly annotations of mid-twentieth-century language theories that focus on what he calls the “tele-technics” of representation and are primarily descriptive and conceptually thin. Their lack of substantive arguments are covered up with a theatrical prose that often dissolves into unintended self-parodies. They are, therefore, often not taken seriously and are read with an indulgent amusement. Nonetheless, I think one should pay attention to his texts in their larger historical contexts and their relations with existing social relations. No matter how shallow and derivative they may be, their interpretive conclusions are symptomatic of the class politics of institutional theory by which the norms of reading and the accepted forms for the interpretation of culture are taught to the future labor force. Unpacking the discursive strategies and political values by which they are constructed is therefore necessary for any serious intervention that goes beyond local activism in the reorganization of the existing social relations.

One should not dismiss vacuous cultural texts as insignificant because, as we have seen in the popular culture, it is through such texts and the routine ploys of their language that ideology circulates and makes much of its most lasting impact. In their shifting intensities, Cohen’s “wows” are indexes of the magnitude of the class contradictions of contemporary capitalism and the ways in which the “new” is being used to contain them.

Before analyzing his institutional writings on cultural theory and cultural studies in some detail, I will sketch here in broad terms

some of the framing assumptions of his writings, because unfolding them will make clear the role of institutional theory in rewriting and teaching class antagonisms as cultural difference. Theory today has become an integral part of an ongoing institutional process of recalibrating, refining, and readjusting cultural discourses to produce concepts (e.g., "climate change"), reading strategies (e.g., "performativity"), and interpretive slogans (e.g., "the future belongs to ghosts") that are necessary for constantly updating the cultural representations by which the class interests of the transnational bourgeoisie are normalized. Cohen's writings are a documentation of this process of ideological regulation and control of theory. With an almost comical excitement, they reflect what is "in" (i.e., what is ideologically well-adjusted to capital) and what is "out" (i.e., what is resistant to capital) in the culture of theory now.

Like the majority of institutional theorists, most of Cohen's writings are a repetition of the old post-structuralist talking points. Theory, for example, is said to be a language construct whose reference to its outside is indeterminate. Therefore any attempt (such as the one I am making here) to relate theory to social relations is misguided in part because there are, according to the post-structuralist canon, no concepts that correspond to reality and provide a reliable understanding of the outside. Concepts are assumed to be language tropes in self-difference with no purchase on the reality outside language. Theory, in other words, is to a very large extent autonomous from such outside forces as class relations. Theory, to put it differently, is, according to these views, an interpretation and not an explanation. The suspension of the relation between theory and the social world ultimately turns the social world into an unexplainable text that can be interpreted in different ways but never explained and understood (Cohen, "Climate Change" 84–86). Theory interprets, it does not explain.

There is, therefore, never any reliable knowledge of the outside to form a basis on which one can act to transform the dominant social relations. Any transformation that goes beyond the changes in representation—and at most, cultural reforms such as the ones that Cohen's reading of Katrina prescribes—is, therefore, seen as a form of escape from inscriptional difference and regarded to be the mark of an outdated social fantasy. This is the running theme of Cohen's "climate change."

As part of his textualizing and localizing change, class, for example, is turned into an excess of language whose meaning exceeds all fixed referents (e.g., proletariat), which means its only referent is its

own processes of signification. Class, in other words, does not exist except as a language trope in self-difference.

Concepts such as class are, of course, neither tropic excess (a Derridean fixation) nor a mimesis of reality (a Hegelian obsession). Rather, they “run side by side” with reality “like two asymptotes, always approaching each other yet never meeting” (Engels, “To C. Schmidt”). Concepts provide the knowledge necessary for collective action to change the existing social relations. Demolishing them on epistemo-rhetorical grounds is simply a way of reducing all social struggles for change to a change of cultural meanings and negotiations for local adjustments that leave the system of wage-labor itself intact.

Cohen, following Derrida (“Marx & Sons”), does not openly reject class but textualizes it and, through its resignification, hollows it out from its economic contents. At the “Chronopolitics” conference (in Albany, New York, Spring 2007; I will discuss the conference later), for example, after playing the old game of “not knowing” (a popular gesture of abandoning interpretive authority among institutional theorists, which always precedes their authoritarian pronouncements), and after stating that there was no such thing as class (which meant that class was a graphematics of a concept and simply a self-referential mark in language), Cohen read class in terms of a vulgar Malthusian biopolitics. He “pre-dicted” (again, another gesture of not knowing, in order to give one’s utterance the full rhetorical force of “truth”) the continued emergence of an underclass (which he said was not a class) of “disposable humanity” (a concept most recently elaborated in *Disposable People* by Kevin Bales) that will be subject to population culling in the upcoming resource wars, and an overclass (which he emphasized was not a class) of the *über*-rich. While insisting that there was no such thing as class, he nevertheless went on to describe its features in some detail (his writings, as I will point out, are saturated with such conceptual incoherencies).

By tying class to the biopolitics of population, Cohen eliminated the structure of opposition between labor and capital over the socially produced surplus labor that actually produces classes. Class is not an excess of meaning or a surplus of population but the outcome of the relations of production that determine not only the social division of labor but all cultural structures such as language and the way it means at different stages of the development of production relations.

It is not only “class” that in Cohen’s texts is emptied of its material contents. Ideology, to take another example, provides an understanding of how wage-labor structures the material social relations

under capitalism. Cohen reduces it (following de Man) to a misreading, namely, the phenomenalization of the inscription that is the result of the failure to recognize the materiality of the letter (*Ideology and Inscription* 16–24; 78–91; de Man, *Resistance to Theory* 11, 89). Demolishing ideology as a materialist concept and turning it into an indeterminate effect of language allows him to substitute the materiality of the letter for material labor and invert capitalism from a system of wage-labor into a system of cultural representations. He, like many institutional theorists today, criticizes capitalism as a structure of meanings but leaves it intact as a material system of wage-labor.

Having rewritten class and ideology as excesses of meaning beyond history, Cohen de-historicizes the “new” (the grounding concept of his “climate change”). What he represents as the “new” (theory) is a recycling of the cultural theories of the past century—mostly post-structuralism mixed with a spectral Benjamin and some Deleuzian vitalist tele-technics. Derrida-Benjamin-Deleuze are his trinity of the new. The concepts and arguments of his “new,” however, have all become clichés in contemporary theory. However, Cohen seems to think they are fresh ideas. At the “Chronopolitics” conference, for instance, with an almost evangelical zeal and an amusing historical innocence, he represented these clichés—from posthumanism, exteriority, causeless arrival, and letteration, to x-factors, inscription, and occularcentrism, and everything “nonlinear” in between—as elements of a mutation in theory (“climate change”) that have instituted a new paradigm in twenty-first-century theory. At some level, however, he seemed to be aware that his “new” are old clichés, and therefore he attempted to make them energetic and lively by rewording them in a language whose verbal effects, as I have already said, often became unintended baroque self-parodies.

I have mentioned “climate change” several times and it is time to say more about it. Cohen’s “climate change” is based on his claim that twentieth-century paradigms cannot perceive twenty-first-century horizons, and that therefore new theories are needed to interpret new realities (such as Katrina). “Climate change” is a monolithic discourse aimed at displaying the “new” by intervening in and suspending the “‘auteurist,’ humanist, ‘modernist,’ mimetic, and historicist projects” of the twentieth century (*Hitchcock’s Cryptonymies* 5). However, this is a confirmation of existing social relations presented as an intervention in them. Like the liberalism and the humanism that they rely on, these projects have become ideological burdens on global capital, which is now the most anti-mimetic, antihumanist, and post-auteurist

institution and seeks the kind of libertarian posthumanism that the latter-day post-structuralists, Cohen among them, are arguing for.

The idea of “climate change” is derived from Cary Wolfe’s *Critical Environments*. Its internal arguments are all “applications” of Paul de Man’s notion of “aesthetic ideology” (*Resistance to Theory* 3–20; 73–105; *Aesthetic Ideology* 34–50; 70–90; 163–184), which was a rather popular view in the past century’s literary criticism, especially in the interpretation of Romanticism and its poetics. De Man’s point, as I will discuss in more detail later, is that writing and experience are of two different epistemological orders. Cohen treats this familiar idea, which in various forms is used in all class societies to isolate the experiences of the working day from the laws of private property, as a groundbreaking theory and applies it to all texts of culture that he mechanically reads as untranslatable inscriptions of “letteration and runes” (“Climate Change” 93).

Discovery of inscriptionality leads him to rediscover other old post-structuralist discoveries that the world is a text, is a text, is a text, is a text, . . . and a text is a representation, is a representation, is a representation, is a representation which “perpetually cites itself circularly and in advance” (93). Wow!

But these “climate change” wows, as I said at the outset, are not all that wow-y any more. Having vacated the world from “models of the human” (95) by “letteration,” Cohen seems to sense that after over half a century of (post-structuralist) lettering of the world, it no longer produces “shock and awe” in readers. For more intensity, he vacates the already vacated by pre-lettering the letter. The preletteral (taken from Kristeva’s understanding of materiality as chora) remakes the world as the unrepresentable whose being cannot be reduced to meaning:

Hitchcock’s “J” is all but preletteral in the absence of its umbrella-like spur, masking a preoriginary cut or slash that serially engenders space and perception. It *lodges*. . . The “J,” in one sense, is a nexus where letteration and graphematic of the visible meet in a sort of transit station into or dissolving cognitive relays, postal systems, mnemonic regimes, digitalization. (95–96)

The preletteral displaces the anthropic practices and reorganizes the world as a “tele-technic order.” This is the very order through which capitalism replaces human labor by technicity—not to meet human needs but to reduce the cost of labor. The anti-anthropic order is the anti-worker order of low labor cost and high surplus labor. What

Cohen represents as the “new” cutting-edge theory autonomous from its “outside” (the economic) is, it turns out, a relegitimization of the existing economic order.

The programmatic point of “climate change,” as I have suggested before, is that the “new” (which he maps in the “old” ways chronologically as twenty-first century) realities require “new” modes of reading because the old (twentieth century, again a point in chronology) interpretive paradigms cannot grasp the complexities of the “new” (“Minority Report”); or, as he put it in his presentation at the “Chronopolitics” conference, to understand the new realities of the twenty-first century, a “new head” is needed. A “new head” that is free from the modernist memory regimes and its “anthro-politics.” I will discuss some of the implications of this secondhand correspondence theory of representation later. Here I want to say that neither his “climate” nor his “change” have anything to do with the material world (where the climate changes). Rather, he uses “climate change” as an ideological hammer to demolish all that stands in the way of capital in its travels across the world—as “outdated.” During the discussion section of the “Chronopolitics” conference, for instance, in a language and tone that sounded more like a linguistic mugging than an invitation to conversations on ideas (as is the custom in conferences), he labeled his critics—who pointed out that his arguments reproduced the old class politics of capital in the guise of new theory—as “outdated” and told them that their views were “old”—very old. In the commodity logic of the market, “old” is the terminal argument (“unmarketable”) to which there are no counterarguments. In the name of the “new,” he silenced the “other” and excluded the public from participation in public debates in a public conference supported by public funds in a public university. *\*Climate change.\**

The binary of old/new (twentieth century/twenty-first century) by which Cohen silenced his critics at the conference underlies all his declarations. The argument of the “new” that he uses is culturally very compelling because its discursive power derives from the material marketing relations that divide the world into old/new commodities and privilege the “new” commodity as the best. Cohen manipulates this marketing common sense and the binary it normalizes in order to discredit revolutionary theory as “old” and to label all revolutionary struggles for social transformation as “outdated.”

However, the irony here is that the binary that he needs in order to discredit the revolutionary as “old” gets in the way of his constructing the hybridity that he needs to dismantle class binaries (owners/workers). These and similar contradictions that make his discourses

incoherent, however, are not simply illogical. They are the result of the class contradictions that “climate change” is fabricated to contain, but which exceed its containing strategies and engulf it. Before discussing the ways in which Cohen “solves” these contradictions, I want to point to the global contradictions that structure “climate change.”

The basic idea of Cohen’s “climate change”—that “new” theories are necessary to understand “new” realities (“Minority Report”)—is itself founded on a mimetic epistemology (i.e., what he rejects humanism, mimesis, auteurism for). Mimetic epistemology is a version of the old modernist positivism—the unity of the represented and the representational. It also underlies identity politics, which assumes a correspondence between identity and authentic experience (e.g., only a woman understands women’s oppression). Mimetic epistemology marginalizes the materialist understanding of the event. It, unlike materialist theory, regards the “event” to be an autonomous heterogeneity that is intelligible only in terms derived from its own internal logic (its “difference”): mimetic epistemology is a mimesis of the immanent logic of the event. The event produces an epistemology that is then used to understand the event. It is, in other words, an epistemology that protects the order of things (difference) from their outside. Materialism contests this class shield that masquerades as epistemology and regards the event to be the effect of complex social determinations that in fact shape what seems to be the immanent logic of the event—difference is always the local form of totality and not a freestanding event. Hamlet’s problem, contrary to Derrida, is that he attempts to make sense of the ghost mimetically, namely, as a difference in its own terms, and thus does not “see” it as an apparition of the State power in its prevailing class conditions. A woman, to go back to the mimetic epistemology of identity politics, does indeed experience oppression as a woman, but her experience cannot be understood (and changed) in its own indwelling terms. What Hamlet sees, as I will explain later in my discussion of the “eye,” is the outcome of alienated social relations; it is not a self-marking specter but social alienated relations as specter. The twenty-first century’s realities are indeed different from those of the twentieth century, but they cannot be grasped in the twenty-first century’s own terms because twenty-first-century realities are produced by social class relations whose history goes back to the modern social division of labor and the formation of wage-labor in early modernity. The twenty-first century, in other words, is not a freestanding “new” reality that is intelligible only in terms of an epistemology that imitates (mimes) its

internal logic. What seems to be a “new” reality is the accumulation of the surplus labor of the past and the ongoing class struggles over the social appropriation of that surplus.

Mimetic epistemology, in all its forms, is a ruse of metaphysics to separate culture from its material base and foreground it as an independent play of meanings. The idea that one needs a “new head” to understand the “new” realities is part of this metaphysics, and it is very popular in contemporary cultural theory. In his *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century American Politics With an 18th-Century Brain*, for example, George Lakoff writes that the cause of the defeat of the U.S. democrats in election after election is a misrecognition of the fact that people don't approach the world logically. In other words, the reason for the power of the conservatives is mental and not material. “Climate change,” similarly, is a mentalist ontology whose arguments are symptoms of what Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness* calls the fragmented bourgeois thinking caused by the escape from history. Cohen's criticism of “humanism,” “auteurism,” “mimesis,” and similar mentalist projects is not a criticism of mentalism as such (his interpretation of Hitchcock is a mentalist graphematics) but of the models of mentalism that have become impediments to the appropriation of higher levels of surplus labor from the global labor force.

Cohen's formal anti-mimesis (*Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock; Hitchcock's Cryptonymies*) depends on this mimetic epistemology; he relies on a conventional mimetic epistemology and its reactionary identity politics of difference to argue for “climate change” as a poetics free from identitarian anthropo-semiotics. My point is not to simply do a Derridean reading here and show how Cohen's anti-mimesis falls apart because it is grounded on the very premises that he excludes. The contradictions in “climate change” are interesting not because they show the rifts in Cohen's arguments, but because they reproduce the class contradictions that they try so hard to repress and contain. They are a mimesis of class relations.

The incoherence is not local. To take another instance: on one hand, Cohen dismisses progress as perhaps another “cruel Enlightenment episteme” (*Hitchcock's Cryptonymies I*, xiv) and, on the other, he regards what in the “Chronopolitics” conference he called the “new head”—the head beyond anthropolitics—as the only one capable of understanding the complexities of “climate change.” The “new head” is nothing if not the embodiment of forward-moving “progress”: it is assumed to be more evolved than the “old head” and therefore at home with the twenty-first-century horizon. The incoherence in



Cohen's position (rejecting and embracing progress at the same time) is part of post-structuralism's double move by which, as I will discuss shortly, it normalizes the class interests of the owners. I must add here that what is also interesting about the "new head" is that it is not solely the result of evolutionary "progress," it is also just a "head"—an organ without a body. It is, in other words, the twin of a certain Cartesian essentialist binarism in which the "body" and "mind" are separated and the "mind" is privileged as the primary—another version of mentalism. This is the very binarism that by privileging the mind constructs the humanist head. Although Cohen formally rejects the humanist head as a residue of a mimetic modernism ("Climate Change" 85; 87; 89; 92; 95), it is in the rifts of his discourses that the humanist head actually writes the memory regimes of his posthumanist "new head."

In order to reconcile contradictions that are the result of his class politics, such as embracing and rejecting progress or binaries, Cohen deploys the post-structuralist device of the "double session" and its logic of "and/both" that produces hybridity out of opposites without discarding them. This is the logic that Benjamin institutes through his "dialectic at a standstill" (with its overtones of a Kierkegaardian metaphysics of melancholy, which is the privileged mood of the high bourgeoisie) to manufacture the double logic of spiritual materialism (of history).

The "double session" is, ostensibly, a rewriting to overcome the binary distinctions (mimesis/anti-mimesis; new/old) that post-structuralism regards with ambivalence and suspicion as part of the metaphysics of presence. This ambivalence toward the difference between mimesis/nonmimetic and new/old is represented in post-structuralism as a cognitive matter—a result of thinking about truth and its foundation in Western philosophy. Like all cognitive/philosophical matters, however, it is a cultural legitimization of the economic organization of society.

Capital is aggressively progressivist (see Derrida and his equivocations on "for better" with regard to globalization in Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*) in technology (tele-technics) because it is by technicity that the market reduces the cost of labor and, in a chain of substitutions, replaces the old commodities with the new and propels the market forward. Cohen's writings are extensions of the technologic of the market. His "climate change" is an emptying of the world from its historical contents and their refiguring as representation—the absolute technics. He is one of the technocrats of the "new head" that substitutes technics for philosophy, and letteration for labor.

Cohen's analytical confusions—the double embrace of the yes and no, progress and regress, binary and hybridity—are the result of his class politics that has to look back to relations of property and forward to the technologic of the market.

To put it differently: to acquire the cultural legitimacy that gives it moral authority and universalizes its values (“free” market), the owning class needs the “new” to represent itself as a forward-looking order open to different and emerging ideas. It, therefore, has an *ur*-“novum organum,” which is interpreted by its theorists in different historical periods differently according to its specific historical needs. The “novum organum” of each age takes a different form and a new name. Derrida, for example, articulates the “novum organum” of postwar capitalism as “dissemination” and marks it by its logic of anti-mimesis and hybridity.

Anti-mimesis cuts the relation of reality and everyday language and opens up a fissure in realism. It is the representational logic of antimaterialist explanations in, for example, religion that interprets the worldly by the otherworldly, namely, by the “miracle.” Miracle is the sublime of anti-mimesis. It is the epistemology of the owning class by which it isolates the existing social relations from their causes in history. Cohen's causeless arrival, which is the feature of all events in “climate change” (“Chronopolitics” conference), is the miraculous arrival of the new.

However, even more than the “new” and its miraculous arrival, the owning class needs the old social relations of property to maintain its economic hegemony and political power. The owning class's source of power is the old social relations of property (class relations), which are always in contradiction with the emerging relations of production that develop new revolutionary forces within them. The contradictions between the (old) social relations and the (new) forces of production are obscured and the crisis of change is postponed by representing the old social relations as new and suturing them to the new forces of production. This is what Cohen's “climate change” does: it re-presents old theories (which are the effects of old social relations) as new and sutures them to new forces of production (which he depicts as tele-technics) to defuse the conflicts between the two and thus relegitimate things as they are. “Climate change” is a crisis management discursive device: a means for repairing the ideological damage done by the new forces of production to the old social relations.

This has always been the role of institutional theorists. They produce concepts such as “posthumanism,” reading practices such as “dialectic at a standstill,” and interpretive theories such as “to-come”

(as in democracy-to-come), to dissolve the difference between binaries that points to the antagonism between workers and owners and to contain class crisis by a reconciliationist poetics.

Post-structuralism's "double-session" (Derrida, *Dissemination* 3–59) is, in other words, not so much a philosophical operation as a means for class crisis management. It turns the material fissure between the economic and the cultural into an epistemo-textual suspicion toward binaries themselves and shades the difference between them by means of such tropes as spacing, hymen, supplementarity, friendship, secret, spectrality, and so on that carve out a site of in-between-ness in the binaries but without abandoning them. In discussing anti-mimesis, for example, Derrida is quick to point out that it does not stand in opposition to mimesis but is itself a version of mimesis that is itself anti-mimetic: "mimicry without imitation" (*Dissemination* 211). "What counts," in other words, is "the between, the in-between-ness" (212).

Since Heidegger, in-between-ness has become the most popular philosophical landfill for all the class contradictions of capital. The "double-session" reinscribes the old as new and the new as old so as to dissolve the difference between the old social relations and the new forces of production into an in-between-ness.

To do this, institutional theorists provide a theory of history as spectrality, in which the binary "past" and "future" are inverted. History as ghostly turns the "future" into a "before" of the "past" and the "past" into an "after" of the "future." This is the mimesis of the anti-mimetic history—the represented unrepresentable, the unexplainable that is explained (as unexplainable)—and is the sublime of philosophy in all class societies because it displaces production time with pure temporality and thus obscures labor as the source of value. Cohen (following Levinas, through Derrida) makes the spectral the specter of the "wholly other" (see, in addition to Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* and Derrida's *The Gift of Death*, W. F. Haug's "*Das Ganze und das ganz Andere: Zur Kritik der reinen revolutionären Transzendenz*") ("Climate Change" 85; "Minority Report" 12).

The "wholly other" is the new that precedes the old, the old that comes after the new—the unrepresentable absolute other that cannot be ablated with meaning without reserve. The "wholly other" is the total without totality. It (locally) "solves" such contradictions in Cohen's writings as those between his cheerleading for the new and dismissal of progress because progress in this inverted history is a progress without movement—it is an "image" (Benjamin's "dialectic at a standstill"). His anti-mimesis too is reconciled with his mimetic

epistemology because his anti-mimesis, like Derrida's, is also at the same time mimetic. In the spectral history, the mimetic includes its other (Derrida, *Dissemination* 173–285), and the two are in a scandalous (“wow”) cohabitation. The “new” as “wholly other” is, in other words, not the empirical newness of elements of the real but the real itself as the “wholly other”—the unrepresentable self-difference of the to-come.

The “wholly other” is a spiritualization of the shifting labor needs of capital. Cohen's formulation is that the twentieth-century (Old) understanding of the “other” marked the other as specific social identities (woman, black, queer). The “other” of the “new head” exceeds all the others and cannot be exhausted by social identities. Cohen represents the excess of the “wholly other” as an absolute unrepresentable, but in actuality it is a concrete-historical made abstract-spiritual. It is the culturalizing of the material labor conflicts of capital in the age of the globalization of labor whose overflow is, to name one event he discusses, Katrina. In his talk at the “Chronopolitics” conference, Cohen absorbed Katrina into nonexplanatory associations of (dis)connected signs, images, and letterations that constructed Katrina people as “disposable people” and marked them as an excess that cannot be reduced to a conclusion. This is of course the orthodox protocol of reading in post-structuralism in which the conclusion of a subtle reading is postponed, and the more subtle the reading the more delayed its conclusion. The most subtle reading is one in which the conclusion is the last instance that never arrives, which means the subtle reading is one of the strategies for manufacturing a class truce among contesting class interests. There is, of course, no truce among classes, and the role of the institutional theorist is to engineer one by the tele-technics of representation.

Katrina people are not the excess of an unrepresentable “wholly other.” They are those whose labor does not yield the acceptable (by capital) rate of return of surplus labor and thus their labor is not as profitable for capital as that of others. The “wholly other” is the other in a world of globalized labor, represented through the rhetoric of “climate change” as a cultural excess: the graphematics of an indeterminate war-to-come “over the re-inscription of the earth itself” (“Minority Report” 15). After “climate change,” the working day becomes a graphematic riddle that precedes perception and memory and lies beyond the reach of the transparencies of ocular regimes of seeing-knowing.

The depicting of otherness as the specific others was historically necessary for capital when it needed to increase the *national* pool of

labor by recruiting specific others (women, blacks, and so on). This was the time when, for example, women were allowed to enter the labor market in great number and in working positions that were not traditionally normalized for women. "Multiculturalism" is the regime of the other as specific others. Cohen marginalizes the other as specific other because capital has moved beyond the liberal multicultural labor force and is now libertarian and omnicultural (what Derrida naturalizes as "cosmopolitan"). The "wholly other" totalizes all the specific others into cosmopolitan "instruments of labor."

The "wholly other" is the theology of the ghostly; it explains the worldly by the otherworldly (the ghost) and, through mimetic antimimesis, reinstitutes the "miraculous" (unexplainable) as the logic of the social. The "wholly other" as the theo-poetics of "climate change," in other words, is the inversion of revolutionary materialism. According to "climate change" the world might be interpreted in different ways but it can never be explained so as to provide knowledge for collective work to change it. The transformation of social relations, according to "climate change" and its post-logic of the miraculous, is, to repeat, an impossibility, a Utopian fantasy. Cohen's associative reading of Katrina, which inscribes the ghost in the city and thus makes the "disposable" a mark of the "to-come," however, introduces yet another irony into the discourse of "climate change."

The "new" is not, however, as Cohen simplistically suggests, the effect of cultural practices or the result of the "transformation of critical premises" ("Climate Change" 86). It is not, to phrase it differently, the result of a difference within the "old" that overturns the hierarchies of reference/difference, perception/inscription, memory/phenomenalization, and which produces a graphematic (dis)order. Rather, it is, to use some words from Marx, a material practice "bound up with particular historical phases in the development of production" ("Marx to J. Weydemeyer" 58), which is always in history and emerges from the struggles of classes over appropriation of the social surplus and which actually forms the basis of the "critical premises." The "new" as the difference of a double session proposes a new way of interpreting the existing world. The "new" as the effect of new production relations is not about interpretation of the *existing world* but about making a *new world*.

Which brings us back to the question of history, although we have never been away from it. I have already said that "climate change" turns history into a spectral apparition within which the "wholly other" as the "new" becomes a citational structure, a view that is now reproduced over and over again in institutional "scholarly"

conferences such as the one on “Chronopolitics.” “Chronopolitics” is the analysis of the relationship between time and social change and the politics of alternative futures (Wallis, “Chronopolitics: The Impact of Time Perspectives on the Dynamics of Change”). One of the most important contributions to this inquiry is Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other*, which examines allochronicity and how the “other” is always constructed as living in another time, the time that is away from that which normalizes and secures the existing social relations. In the discourse of “climate change,” for example, Cohen exiles the revolutionary other to the other time—the *ana-chronos*—and produces cultural security for the owners by depicting the militant revolutionary as “outdated,”—s/he whose time is irrelevant to the temporality of the market time. For Paul Virilio (“On Speed-Space and Chronopolitics”), allochronicity is a matter of technology. Rey Chow’s *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work*, which is deeply influenced by Fabian’s arguments, reads the Asia Pacific in terms of Heidegger’s “The Age of the World Picture” in order, ostensibly to free it from being the “target” of the temporality of the West. However, she actually ends up rewriting Asia and its history through the time of the West and in the same limiting terms of the very Eurocentric post-structuralism that she criticizes by, for example, interpreting history through the Derridean trope of the “ghost” (90). Cohen deploys “chronopolitics” to construct a time beyond time—a “wholly other” whose temporality puts the time of the revolutionary before the future and thus (following Chow who is following Heidegger) turns history into a spectral temporality, which translates the time of production into the temporality of the “event” and thus places history outside the logic of class struggles (Derrida, *Specters of Marx* 70). Within this history whose materialism is grounded in Benjamin’s theosophy of “materialist” history (the materiality of the “ghost”), Cohen repeats the formula of “climate change”: that an auratic modernism cannot explain the anti-anthropomorphic posthumanism.

The anti-anthrop(omorph)ism and antihumanism that Cohen represents as the effect of “climate change” are in fact staple themes of modernist philosophy and culture. From the early modernist tele-technics of Frankenstein and experiments with the corporeally indeterminate, to Schoenberg’s high modernist atonal and twelve-tone technique, the (anti-)“anthrop” has been the subject of modernist thought. It finds its canonic articulations in the Eurofocal writings of Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, and their institutional annotators today.

The anti-anthropomorphic in its various historical configurations (e.g., as posthumanism) is the official philosophy of the culture of capital. It is refashioned and its politico-economic implications are resourced in each generation by, for example, the theory of the death of the subject (at the time of the emergence of neoliberal economics) or the fantasy about the “new head” (after the move by capital to globalize production). Capital needs the “new” (anti-anthropoic) “head” so as to dismember the proletariat as a militant agent of social change into an organ without body, which is the compliant immaterial worker of the service-knowledge (“head worker”) sector. I will come back to the posthumanism and the way it is used to erase class from understanding social justice at the end of this section.

Cohen’s interpretation of “chronopolitics” or anti-anthrop(omorph)ism, or . . . (fill in the blank) is the result of a routine “application” of his ready-made “theory” by which he writes predictable answers to all questions about the virtual or actual. His “theory” is (as I have already suggested) an “application” of Paul de Man’s totalizing concept of “aesthetic ideology” (*Resistance to Theory* 3–20; 73–105; *Aesthetic Ideology* 34–50; 70–90; 163–184). In de Man, “aesthetic ideology” is the naïve phenomenalization of inscription—the anthropomorphic attribution of human desires and habits to the nonhuman. “Aesthetic ideology” was a concept produced in reaction to an aesthetic thought that was inherited by contemporary critics, notably the New Critics, from a Western romantic theo-poetics that was invented to diffuse the violence of capital against labor in early capitalism by a moral critique of the proletarian city. New Criticism—the poetics of Fordism—and its underlying neo-Kantianism (although de Man attempted to make Kant a materialist, which tells us a great deal about his understanding of materialism) had become irrelevant to the neoliberal capitalism of the mid-century, which needed a new poetics without interiority. Post-structuralism is that poetics.

The anti-anthropomorphism that Cohen represents as the groundbreaking contribution of “climate change” and its chronopolitics of the “posthuman” has been not only one of the grand themes of modernism but also such a popular motif in cultures of the machine that it has become a major subject in comic books. DC Comics, for example, has been having fun with (anti)anthropomorphism in its “Anthro” (“full of futuristic stuff”) series. It is a double irony that some of the most recent appearances of “Anthro” have been in comics with titles such as *Crisis on Infinite Earth* and *Tales of the Unexpected*—titles that echo the themes (infinite, surprise, the unrepresentable) that Cohen promotes as signs of the unexplainable “climate change.”

Cohen's writings are the comics of theory. Like all comics, they are structured by a binary Manichean moral logic that divides the world into "old" (bad guys) and "new" (good guys). He, in other words, uses binaries profusely but with a diverting innocence, and, without the slightest self-reflexivity, like a comic "hero," he fights the other's binaries (e.g., class binaries) to save the world from the old heads who still struggle for transforming the world.

Cohen's anti-anthropeic ideology, like all ideologies, however, cannot contain, without remainder, what it represses. The repressed "anthrop" and its assigned auratics return to Cohen's writings over and over again. Having, for instance, spent a great deal of time arguing against auteurism, its mimetic poetics and humanism, for example, he wonders if Hitchcock might be "a Hegel of the cinematic" ("Climate Change" 91). The master of graphematics, it turns out, is the philosopher of Spirit and its Ocularism: Hitchcock (grammatologist of the letter) is Hegel (phenomenologist of the spirit and its mimesis as the State).

There is more: Hitchcock's anti-anthropomorphism is itself anthropomorphic: "Hitchcock knows these deserts speak" (92). Hitchcock is, in other words, the same all-knowing anthropeic subject of the metaphysics of humanism. The subject of his knowing is also anthropomorphized: "these deserts speak" (92). The desert is human: it "speaks." Hitchcock's Hegelian ocularism (seeing is knowing) introduces an unintended irony into Cohen's "theory" of the anti-anthropeic "new head" and leaves his cryptonymy in ruins: the criticism of aesthetic ideology, it is now clear, is itself an "aesthetic ideology."

The historical role of materialist critique is to activate the contradictions between the existing social relations and the emerging forces of production whose conflicts are the source of social transformation. Cohen's institutionalist "theory" aims at repressing the crisis ("crisis" is, of course, itself a marginalized concept in post-structuralism). His writings are strategies to contain these contradictions by reconciling the fading social relations (which were articulated in the mid-twentieth-century post-structuralist theories) with the new material forces that have developed as a result of the globalization of production and the rise of a new, world working class. "Climate change" denies the possibility of radical social change, which, as I have said, it regards to be a desire for presence and escape from difference—a form of utopianism. The only change for Cohen is essentially letteral—the sabotage of aura. However, if "climate change" is read reflexively, in the same terms by which it reads others, it soon becomes clear that it



is itself a textual utopia—a nowhere of signs from which it postpones change everywhere in order to cloud class difference.

The discourse of “climate change” blocks social transformation by first equating change with “double writing” that allows it, in the name of inscribing difference, to relegitimize the existing social relations through a rewriting with interval and thus warn against any radical action, which Derrida calls “jumping” (*Positions* 41). Then it extends the “interval” (*Positions* 42) of the double writing and thus postpones social justice to a “to-come” (Derrida, “Force of Law” 27) and, consequently, avoids the present through the “to come”—namely, an excess whose excessiveness will never be recuperated by history: a utopia of letter(ation). “Climate change” is not in actuality opposed to utopianism. It is itself an idealist utopia of letters (Cohen, *Hitchcock’s Cryptonymies*). What it discredits as Utopian is the materialist historical struggles for economic equality and social justice for the here and now. Economic justice in the “climate change” is an outdated fantasy. Yet, as one reviewer put it in *The London Review of Books* (February 2003, 17–18), “It is when radicals are decried as Jeremiahs by liberals and as starry-eyed ‘utopianists’ by the conservatives that they know they have got it more or less right.”

Cohen’s prose plays an important role in his suturing the old post-structuralist theories to the new material realities, which allows him to absorb the new production relations into the old cultural representations and market the new bundle as a pathbreaking interpretation. He uses sentences that are lexically (on the textural surface of the sentence) theatrical and thus (amusingly) intriguing. Syntactically, where the complexity of thinking and the connections of ideas become formative, his sentences are mundane and straightforward. His essay “Climate Change in the Aesthetic State (A Memory (Dis)Order),” for example, has a lexically melodramatic surface on the “graphemic operations” (83), “auratic habits,” and “ocularcentric ‘order’” (84). The syntactical structures, which are exceedingly simple, however, reproduce what is basically a paraphrase of the old post-structuralist trope-cliché about the Western preoccupation with the transparency of seeing and/as knowing (Derrida, *Memoires of the Blind*). Ocularity and a-ocularity become the themes by which he reads Hitchcock and his denaturalizing of the “eye” (89) and ends with another Derridean conclusion in which sight is tied to the spectre (91). The lexicon, in other words, like the images in an advertisement, draws attention to the commodity, but the commodity itself is made of refurbished parts from other commodities held together by the famous brand name: Derrida.

Through these representational stunts the reader is entertained into conceding to the class politics of the dominant theory, which is necessary for the frictionless operation of capital, while thinking that s/he is on the edge of an unprecedented reality. The suturing of the recycled theories to new material relations allows Cohen to displace the material “new,” which is the effect of historical class struggles, with a “ghostly” (spiritual) “new,” which is manufactured discursively. His writings, as in popular cultural texts, uses verbal pastiche and gimmicky language to render its old ideological narratives as brand new and the most exciting and momentous events in the world. The gap between theatrical language and plain contents is not, however, accidental or the result of textual exhibitionism but is the historical consequence of the class contradictions that, as I have said, his texts attempt to contain.

Most of Cohen's writings on media are variations on the theme of ocularity: how seeing as truth is an “old head” idea. He presents the “seeing is not truth” leitmotif with all the excitement of a new discovery. Ocularcentrism and its auratic regime, however, is not an effect of the metaphysics of presence as he, in annotating Derrida, represents it, but an effect of private property. His anti-ocularism, in other words, is an ideological ruse to put the “eye” out of history (“Prosthesis of the Visible” in *Hitchcock's Cryptonymies* 2 169–190).

In the place of all physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of all these senses, . . . the abolition of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities, but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, human. The eye has become a human eye, just as its object has become a social, human object—an object made by man for man. The senses have therefore become directly in their practice theoreticians. They relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an objective human relation to itself and to man, and vice versa. Need or enjoyment have consequently lost their egotistical nature, and nature has lost its mere utility by use becoming human use. (Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” 300).

Cohen's writings disconnect “eye” and the ocular regime from the regime of private property.

Cohen's texts belong to a genre of academic theory that has emerged after the analytical exhaustion of post-structuralism and the interpretive dead end that it and its allied discourses (Benjaminian, Deleuzian, etc.) have reached. Post-structuralism was, as I have

suggested, the cultural legitimization of the social relations of production in the mid-twentieth century. The purpose of the new genre is to maintain those relations and suture them to new forces of production and postpone the crisis that always arises from the conflicts of social relations and new forces of production. The new genre does this by “proving” the living force of old theory (i.e., social relations) by “applying” it to current situations and events. Cohen, for example, following Samuel Weber, spends a great deal of time “applying” Derrida, de Man, and Benjamin to contemporary media. Media has become an increasingly important part of institutional theory because it is through media (from films and videos to cyber writings) that American capitalism represents its class interests as the cutting-edge realities of now. What is at stake in the new genre, in other words, is not post-structuralism itself but what post-structuralism legitimates socially, namely, the property relations of the past century. In showing the relevance of the old post-structuralism and the social relations it legitimates in the languages of difference and hybridity, anti-mimesis and graphematics, Cohen and others imply that there is no social and cultural change that cannot be accounted for by the old social relations. In their writings, hybridity and “difference” continue to shape culture even though “society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other” (Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” 485).

This Americanized form of post-structuralism has become the grand cultural theory of contemporary American capitalism. It is now the most effective interpretive weapon in the intraclass wars between the American form of capitalism and its European and Asian rivals, for example, in China. Post-structuralism, to put it differently, has become the theory of a new cultural missionary work of capitalism. Like the old missionaries in Africa, the academics of American, European, and Asian universities are conducting wars of positions on behalf of the international bourgeoisie in China. Humanities departments in Chinese universities have in effect become missionary outposts for capitalism. However, unlike nineteenth-century missionary outposts where various versions of Christianity competed to legitimate capitalism, today it is a cultural theory (post-structuralism) that is doing the converting. The “native” interpretive practices (like native religions in Africa) such as nationalist poetics or formalist exegesis in the humanities departments in Chinese universities are dismissed by the post-structuralist missionaries as outmoded and are displaced by “new” theories. As in the nineteenth century, the work of the

missionaries is maintained by huge funds from business, foundations, governments, and their agencies (e.g., universities).

As I have said before, post-structuralism is being constantly recalibrated and adjusted for these intraclass wars, but the story of all such refigurings of deconstruction is the “survival of deconstruction after deconstruction”—its “afterlives.” After each rewriting, post-structuralism becomes more itself and the orthodoxy becomes more orthodox. Cohen’s lectures in China (e.g., “Minority Report”) are stories of the orthodoxy after orthodoxy—more deconstruction after deconstruction. They legitimate American capitalism as the sublime of difference by culturally discrediting socialism through displacing materialist understanding of culture by the ghostly materiality of archives and memories.

In this zone of the ghostly, “climate change” becomes the time of the posthuman. Cohen’s narrative of posthumanism, like his anti-mimesis, is formulaic: it is the “application” of Paul de Man’s “aesthetic ideology” mixed with Derrida’s animal-centric elementalizing of the social. To construct his posthumanism, Cohen places the human outside the history of labor (which is a repeating of the mid-twentieth-century stories of the subject) and produces an essentialist humanism as a foil of posthumanism. He has, one should keep in mind, no problem with humanism as such. He is actually quite at home especially in its spiritualized versions. As I have mentioned, he writes Hitchcock as “the Hegel of the cinematic.” His target of demolition is socialist humanism, which is not, as is childishly implied, about some Feuerbachian human essence and/as subject (“the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations,” Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” 7). Socialist humanism is a historical transformation—the result of “the annulment of private property.” It is “the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being” (Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts” 296).

Cohen’s posthumanism, is an example of what I called his enthusiastic cheerleading for whatever happens to be the current wisdom in the institutional theory, which he represents excitedly as the cutting edge of knowledge. Posthumanism is a growing interpretive tendency in the academy and the most recent form of the cultural muting of class relations (D. Haraway, *When Species Meet (Posthumanities)*). It is, like all such “new” trends, also highly marketable. So much so that the University of Minnesota Press, which has always had a keen sense in book business and commodification of the “new” trends, has in fact devoted a whole new series to it.

Posthumanism is the cultural trope for the affirmation of private property framed in a dream of a trans-species life by overcoming the binary that ostensibly opposes man as a thinking animal to other living species. Actually, however, it erases the binary of property owner/propertyless by collapsing the species life and animal life, and in doing so inverts the social contradictions of capitalism into natural differences that are unrepresentable because the “natural” is itself a signifier for that which always already exceeds “human” concepts (Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*). Posthumanism, to put it differently, is a version of a vulgar Kantian metaphysics that, by textualizing a discredited Cartesian binary, insists on looking at things in their “own” unknowable terms, free from their “outside.” Through the prophetics of posthumanities, Cohen de-socializes the social and naturalizes the logic of the market as a spiritual force that is unrepresentable and yet shapes all representation.

### CULTURAL STUDIES AS MIMETIC EPISTEMOLOGY

As a prophetic chronicler of the transition to the posthumanist humanities, Cohen’s writings also rewrite the history of cultural studies in a way that remodels the study of culture into a speculative practice that substitutes for materialist critique a mode of de-inscription, which ultimately positions the reader as ecstatic observer of the textual self-undoing of all social relations—what he calls their “eventfulness.” In so doing, in the guise of a more “political” project (which criticizes the aestheticizing of culture), he renders cultural studies more amenable to the needs of capital for an educated workforce that can continually deconstruct social reality to find new avenues of profit without the ability to understand why the market functions against their interests.

Cohen claims that there are, on the contemporary scene, three modes of “cultural studies”: the cultural studies that are grounded in a “mimetic” theory of language; another that represents itself as recognizing the nonmimetic of language but remains mimetic; and a third truly nonmimetic cultural studies, which he sees as the only advanced mode of reading culture. Echoing his textualist mentors Derrida and de Man, Cohen finds that most of what passes for cultural studies now “evades the problematic and programming of inscription” (*Material* xi) by “relapsing” into mimetic codes of “a pragmatic, everyday, referential, socio-historicist ‘politics’” (*Ideology* 102) that serves to “preclude alternative modes of thought, or action . . . that remain key . . . to addressing the accelerated evisceration

of terrestrial resources in the machinery of mimeto-capitalism" (107). In his emphasis on the mimeticism (or not) of language, what becomes clear is that Cohen's reading of "cultural studies" is an attempt to absorb the cultural turn in an earlier linguistic turn and to thus argue that culture, far from being a site of plenitude (which he seems to think is the underlying idea of mainstream cultural studies), is itself a language effect. Language, he argues, is a material formation that determines meaning in a culture independently of labor. In other words, unlike Marx—for whom language is material only to the extent that as "practical consciousness" (*German Ideology* 49) it is inserted in the "process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature" (*Capital* Vol. I, 283)—for Cohen language is material in itself. It is thus in the terms of this immanent materiality of language that Cohen advances what he claims is a "materialist" understanding of culture.

Again, what is important here is the way in which Cohen repackages the textualist theory of materiality developed in the 1960s and '70s as the "new" boundary of cultural studies while displacing the materialism of labor (as the "old"). For Cohen, what is material is the excessive differential slippage (free play) of the signifier over the series of signifieds as without origin or end. Since all concepts (signifieds) emerge in the process of signification, and because human practices are conventionally made intelligible through the habitual repetition of linguistic codes, the material is thus a language effect—what Cohen calls the "inscription of anteriority" in discourse—in relation to which all other values are then determined. In the discursive cultural theory represented by Cohen, culture is itself material because it is the singular means as well as the medium in which the "sense of the real" is constructed in language and the place of the subject primarily determined. This immanent cultural theory assumes that "the entities discourse refers to are constituted in and by discourse" (Hindess and Hirst 19–20). Culture, in other words, is not the other of a real world lying "out there" beyond the means with which we attempt to grasp it—what is "outside" (e.g., nature or truth) is always already an effect of the "inside" of the modes of signification available in a culture. Moreover, according to Cohen, the concept of ideology should be equated with "mimesis"—"ideology is always mimetic" (*Material* xii)—because referentiality in language fails to reflect the immanent cultural process of the inscription of meaning. In other words, as Paul de Man puts it, "ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference

with phenomenalism" (*Resistance* 11) and not "false consciousness" of the outside of labor relations, as I am arguing.

How then does this theorization of the materiality of culture, as opposed to the mimeticism of ideology, bear out in the project of a discursive cultural studies as a mode of opposition to the dominant social relations that Cohen is advancing? In fact, for Cohen, "mimesis" is more than simply a mode of representation that "reflects" on the world. It is the mode of rule of an "aesthetic state"—a "ghost state" that actually "does not exist" (*Material* 120) because it is "an entire regime of cognition, interpretation and experience" that exceeds "political ideology" (118) and the "logics attributed to capital" (121)—that "is designed to efface a materiality of inscription" (120). The "ghost state" is, like ideology and materiality for Cohen, a purely cognitive matter with no connection to an outside in labor arrangements. He argues that the mode of intelligibility authorized by the "aesthetic state" dissimulates its own production of meaning in natural reality and thus deflects awareness of the "eventfulness" of history. Historic change, in other words, comes from knowing that the past is always retroactively constructed discursively in the present, which provides a sense of the otherness of the future for Cohen. It is then this "eventfulness" of history that is represented by Cohen, repeating Benjamin, as the project of a "material historiography" (ix), which would found a discursive cultural studies for the contemporary and constitute an operation of "de-inscription": a "performative intervention at the site of pre-recordings" (x) that articulates "a radical (re)programming of the (historical) archive out of which the 'sensorium' would be alternatively produced" (x).

Cohen understands his project of a discursive cultural studies that is more attentive to inscription to be materially embedded in texts themselves. Specifically, it is a matter of the way texts perform the impossibility of their own signification (their unrepresentability) in their very tropes and testify to the ghostly power of inscription over reality. And yet, by locating the impossibility of selfsame meaning in the text itself, Cohen reinscribes the very mimetic logic he claims to be opposing. But the logical contradiction—the fact that what Cohen deploys as the most oppositional narrative toward mimesis is itself mimetic—points to the fact that what is at issue here is not epistemology, as Cohen seems to think, and not an ethical question of "bad" ("old" mimetic) versus "good" ("new" post-mimetic) epistemic models of culture. Rather, the fact that in Cohen's writings the post-mimetic is mimetic with a vengeance indicates that representation,

as Jameson has argued, is always mimetic because it presupposes a relation to history:

Indeed, no working model of the functioning of language, the nature of communication or of the speech act, and the dynamics of formal and stylistic change is conceivable which does not imply a whole philosophy of history. (*Political Unconscious* 59)

What Cohen's writings thus show despite themselves is that at stake in the debates over mimesis is not mimesis but different ways of knowing the world that have different and opposed political consequences in terms of the ongoing class conflicts over the cultural real. To clarify this point it will be useful here to look at a specific cultural reading that Cohen proposes as a model for discursivist cultural studies, his reading of Alfred Hitchcock's film *The 39 Steps*.

According to Cohen, *The 39 Steps* demonstrates the "sheer exteriority" of meaning and subjectivity as the effect of inscription and the "resistance" to it that comes from the impossibility of its project to program the culture and police its boundaries. *The 39 Steps* is thus made to tell a story about history and culture in which the origin and limits of domination are purely formal and emerge from within cultural processes, either within the code of mimesis and its "inscription of anteriority," or, oppositionally, in what Cohen calls "allographics," a writing that reveals its own processes of inscription as purely textual and arbitrary.

In his reading of *The 39 Steps*, Cohen makes Mr. Memory (the vaudeville performer who serves as a pawn between the rival spy agencies in the story) the agent subverting the dominant ideology because he articulates the purely linguistic basis of its rule when he utters a "meaningless" string of numbers and words at the moment in the narrative when he reveals the State secret that stands to undermine its power if it gets into the enemy State's hands. Because in the climactic scene the secret words Mr. Memory utters are audible only as unintelligible sounds on the voice track of the film, they do not signify except in a purely literal way: what they thus signify, for Cohen, is that the State's secret is its own performativity and what they thus teach the viewer is that the way to resist the dominant is to mime it and reveal the cultural process of inscription and subjection to the dominant order. Because the significance of Mr. Memory's statement is purely discursive, the meaning of the utterance is not that of a subversive State secret as referred to in the story but rather what for Cohen is the secret of the State itself: that the State is an effect of a



relation in discourse between signifiers that are actually lacking any order of priority. Thus, what Cohen's "deinscriptive" reading from the "inside" proposes is that the agency of resistance to the culture's dominant meanings and values is not based on a materially oppressed subject that has been foreclosed from representation and that therefore stands as a critique of it (the proletariat), but that it comes from within the dominant order itself at those moments when its own textual performativity is revealed to be the basis of its power (as opposed to any objective "outside" order of causality). Yet, what such a reading itself forecloses is how the text of *The 39 Steps* is the scene not of a self-dismantling of the State but in fact of a hegemonic struggle over the State.

How does *The 39 Steps* reveal this hegemonic struggle? What Cohen codes as a difference within discourse, which is relayed as the contestation between (on one hand) the State and its mimetic agents and (on the other) the subject of (de)inscription, is actually a conflict between basically opposed social orders, the state of capital based on the logic of exchange and an other emergent State within the State based on the materiality of need. The alternative hegemony is dismissed by Cohen when he fails to read the political economy of significance behind the "unnamed enemy state" (*Material* xiii) Mr. Memory is travelling to in the story.

What Cohen dismisses about the film is its materialist subtext that represents the social conditions under which anyone would want to defect to an enemy State and why an enemy State exists in the first place. This materialist text is present from the very opening scenes of the film. During Mr. Memory's performance in the music hall, for instance, there is a class struggle over the use of his ability to recall facts. Not only does the scene make clear that different classes and groups need to know different facts, but the scene also shows that what they are competing for is the power to represent their needs as socially real: a farmer is so preoccupied with his cattle as to repeatedly ask his question about horticulture, while a worker is so consumed with Mae West and alcohol as to instigate a fight when he does not receive the reply he is looking for. Although the scene suggests a reading of class as cultural inscription, seeing it merely in such terms fails to bring to the surface the material conflict that compels individuals to enter into ideological struggle. The class struggle over the means of representation is carried through the film, and it effectively reveals that the central issue involved in the State is not whether it is "representative" (mimetic) or not but the fact that there are different social orders demanding representation. Thus, when Hannay—whose run

from the police for a false murder charge is what carries the bulk of the story—ducks into a public assembly hall and poses as a politician, it does not matter that he is acting and his utopian speech in which all social conflicts are overcome is met with popular enthusiasm. The enthusiasm in fact indicates a popular need to overcome what are intractable social conflicts that have reached the point where they can be spontaneously represented by Hannay as a fight between “nation and nation” as well as “neighbor against neighbor” in his impromptu performance. These moments, in short, point to the popular need for a State where material need has priority over the politics of representation—which foregrounds the false question of whether the State is or is not representative of an extra-discursive real that transcends the class struggle.

For Cohen, most of what passes for cultural studies “evades the problematic and programming of inscription” (*Material* xi) by “relapsing” into mimetic codes of “a pragmatic, everyday, referential, socio-historicist ‘politics’” (*Ideology* 102). But how effective is Cohen’s argument for focusing on inscription as the hegemonic logic of the political in order to contest the logic of capital? Cohen proposes that getting rid of “reference” (mimesis) is more important for changing the world than combating exploitation (the appropriation of surplus labor in the daily). In fact, in advancing such a position Cohen himself rearticulates the logic of transnational capital in relation to the State by proclaiming in effect its material irrelevance, as when he claims that the State cannot be explained according to the “logics attributed to capital” (*Material* 121). Because the ideological function of the State is primarily programming the “sensorium” and hegemonizing consciousness, according to Cohen, such as to create belief in “a pragmatic, everyday, referential, socio-historical ‘politics’” (*Ideology* 102), his own theory that argues for “de-inscribing” the State in actuality itself aestheticizes the State and fails to see it as a site of class struggle. Indeed, the “ghost state” is, like ideology and materiality, for Cohen a purely cognitive matter. Thus, the matter of how social relations shape consciousness is occulted and capitalism is aestheticized as “mimeto-capitalism,” a cognitive regime ruled by a “ghost state” that can only be known at the level of its effects on subjectivity and not in relation to its material preconditions. Far from being “materialist,” Cohen’s war on the referent—the objective relations that precede their “conceptualization”—is, as I have said, a return to a form of neo-Kantian idealism in which “matter” is understood ahistorically as that which produces effects at the level of consciousness but which itself cannot positively be known. But what this occludes, as opaque

to consciousness, is precisely the labor relations that precede it, the fact that, as Marx and Engels argue in *The German Ideology*, the “first premise of all human existence” (including the operations of the linguistic and cultural realms<sup>6</sup>) is that “men must be in a position to live in order to ‘make history,’” and “life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself” (47). By supplanting this production of material life and the agency of labor, what Cohen in fact does is limit any understanding of the material to the terms of the cultural and thus privileges the regime of “ideas” (tropes) as instrumental in shaping the world. History is dematerialized of labor and made strictly a matter of shifting tropes.

Cohen believes that a nonmimetic cultural studies captures the materiality of culture in ways that mimetic types do not, and is oppositional because it frees culture from the tyranny of transparency and phenomenalism he sees as the primary ideological support of contemporary capitalism. However, his theory of materiality as a language effect is itself the dominant understanding of culture, as is evidenced by the fact that it shares with overtly representational theories of culture a hostility to any cultural analysis that implicates the text in the social conflicts over material resources that precede and constitute the internal dynamics of cultural texts. Indeed, Cohen’s own “post-mimetic” understanding of culture as immanent and constitutive of the contemporary real is actually just as much in evidence in liberal humanist cultural theories that argue that representation reflects “timeless” truths about human beings. To make the case that the rule of cultural immanence that blocks off the inside of the text from its “outside” is in fact not a new oppositional view but the norm in culturalist theories, such as Cohen’s, it will be useful to briefly examine the writings of an explicitly liberal humanist cultural theory. This is in order to demonstrate how they, while remaining formally opposed in terms of the cultural politics of representation, are nevertheless underwritten by a common emphasis on the immanence of culture that severs the cultural from its material determinations.

I take the writings of Hannah Arendt as an instance of a liberal humanist cultural theory. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt mimetically traces the development of culture in relation to what she elsewhere calls the “constellation” (*Past and Future* 62) of “labor” (which she takes as merely biological reproduction), “work” (technology), and “action” (politics). She calls these “the capabilities of man” (62) and argues that “their mutual relationships can and do

change historically" (62) as "can best be observed in the changing self-interpretations of man throughout history" (62). History marks a progressive "world alienation," according to Arendt, that has been brought about by a growing freedom from "the burden of laboring and the bondage of necessity" (*Human Condition* 5) due to technology. One of the effects of this alienation has been to disaggregate the "constellation" of labor, work, and politics in such a way as to depoliticize contemporary culture by turning it into mere entertainment rather than "the lasting testimony of the spirit which animated it" (*Past and Future* 201). Arendt thus seemingly argues for a materialist view of culture, considered from within "the vantage point of our newest experiences" (6), especially the constellation of a "consumer society" (211) in which culture has primarily become alienated as a "social commodity" to be "circulated and cashed in for all kinds of other values" (204) rather than valued in itself. It seems at one level that Arendt is not making a culturalist argument as if all that mattered was immanent to culture because the agency of alienation is "not-culture" in her thinking but a bigger constellation of material practices of which it is a part. At the same time, however, she takes a "post-mimetic" position because she argues for the materiality of culture in ways that assume its autonomy from and power to constitute the real—as when, for example, she writes that "speech is what makes man a political being" (*Human Condition* 4). Here language alone effectively makes humans social beings despite the fact that Arendt seems to argue that the origin of such an alienated view of language lies in the commodification of the real in contemporary "consumer society." How can culture at one and the same time be a reflection of the historical constellation of material human activities and the place where the social is itself constituted?

The move that allows Arendt to simultaneously argue that culture reflects social relations and that it is what makes human beings social is itself purely discursive: she calls it the "event" represented by the "invention" of a "new mental instrument," Galileo's telescope, which according to her "cannot be explained by any chain of causality" (*Human Condition* 241, 225). Galileo's telescope is thus effectively a trope for a nonmaterial understanding of culture in the same way that the cultural process of "inscription" for Cohen eludes the "logics attributed to capital" (*Material* 121). The result of the telescope, according to Arendt, has been "world alienation"—the placing of "a decisive distance between man and earth" (228), which has allowed the world to be seen for the first time as an object among others to be subordinated to human purposes. The result of the instrumental

alienation of the world in terms of Arendt's understanding of culture is contradictory: on one hand, she argues that modern culture is materially subordinated to consumerism and, on the other, that it can yet testify to its spiritual origins. The latter is an understanding of culture whose origins, by being alienated from the material as spirit (e.g., Galileo's mind), cannot be causally explained in terms of the existing social constellation and thus can only be borne witness to as "the lasting testimony of the spirit which animated it" (*Past and Future* 201). Although recognizing the economic basis that explains modern alienation—Arendt mentions the "individual expropriation and accumulation of social wealth" as a cause (*Human Condition* 225)—it is finally to the inventions of the human mind that Arendt ascribes the power to determine history. This move inverts material causality, and the modern mastery of productive forces is understood idealistically as coming from ideas. Spirit moves the world, not labor.

Through her concepts of social constellation and historical alienation, Arendt is able to articulate the connection between materiality and human agency in dialectical and even causal ways, and therefore offer a critique of Cohen's basic assumption of materiality as inscription. But because she fundamentally adheres to a liberal humanist ideology of the subject as essentially free of material causality (Galileo's invention eludes causal historical explanation), Arendt too reinscribes the dominant culturalist view of culture, as an in-itself cut off from the social relations of its production, in ways that ideologically aligns her theory with Cohen's. As a consequence, the reification of culture cannot be contested and it becomes an empty tautology for Arendt—"the lasting testimony of the spirit which animated it" (*Past and Future* 201).

Arendt de-historicizes labor, treating it as merely biological (physical reproduction) rather than as a historically developing social relation. Thus, as a result, the task of cultural theory, according to Arendt, is not a matter showing how culture provides an index of "the changing self-interpretations of man throughout history" (*Past and Future* 62) that bears witness to "the spirit of whole epochs" (62), as she claims, but to affirm its essentially spiritual origins as if it simply revealed what lies within "the innermost recesses of the human heart" (209). That this is not a spiritual but economic move is clear in that the goal of her project to recover the spiritual ideal of culture is to oppose the culture of consumption and to produce a subject of taste and distinction in the contemporary—one who takes "culture seriously the way we do" and "who knows how to choose his company" well (226). Such a subject of choice as she imagines, who

chooses above and beyond “coercion by truth” (223) or “sentiment” (self-interest) because he lets taste decide “not only how the world is to look, but also who belongs together in it” (223), in actuality requires the labor of the other as a material basis, whose presence he is then economically free to choose to ignore.

Cohen and Arendt represent an immanent cultural theory. Both are formally “materialist” in terms of understanding culture as producing the real. But both also reduce the real to culture by substituting tropes for a materially causal explanation of the seeming autonomy of culture in the contemporary. “Invention” and “event” are tropes used by Arendt to block a historical and material explanation of the contemporary in the same way that “inscription” and “spectrality” do for Cohen. Arendt takes a liberal humanist position and assumes that a transcendental signified (the original spirit of culture) grounds all representations and thus concludes that culture must be immunized from history in order to humanize the world. Cohen takes a posthumanist position that implicates Arendt’s logocentrism in the dominant order of spectrality he wishes to subvert in the manner of the old avant-garde by foregrounding its opacity. Despite the intellectual and political differences between Cohen and Arendt, they yet share a more basic ideological sameness in their assumption that a Marxist cultural theory is unable to effectively explain culture. For Cohen this means Marxist cultural theory must be condemned as a support of “mimeto-capitalism” because according to it culture “reflects” labor relations, while Arendt too rejects Marxism as underwriting “consumer society” because it understands the “spirit” of culture as a reification of the labor process of history. In place of an understanding of how culture is shaped by economics, both equally mystify the cultural by failing to grasp it as alienated labor. What they are thus rejecting in Marxist cultural theory is what its bourgeois critics have always objected to, its explanation of culture as a superstructural reflection of a class basis produced outside it that exposes language as “an arena of class struggle” (Vološinov 23).

So as to make my arguments regarding culture as a site of conflict over materiality more concrete in terms of cultural practices, and thereby address the question of what is to be done for a transformative cultural theory, I will now turn to Kafka and his readers as an example of the crisis of the contemporary totality. Kafka is popularly seen as the opposite of a “realistic” writer because of the attenuated view of the world in his texts and the impossibility of an authentic human response to these conditions. This view fails to read Kafka’s text as reflecting on social relations because

it conflates reflection with “reference” and assumes that as Kafka does not refer directly to the shape of social relations, or, indeed, any metanarrative of explanation, his texts cannot be said to be “about” social relations. The conclusion is that because Kafka’s writing lacks systemic awareness of society and modalities of change, it must be read in “existential” or “metaphysical” terms that are commonsensically assumed to be above politics and free of labor. However, as I will show, the labor theory of culture is needed in order to penetrate the fog of “aboutness” (reference) and uncover the necessary reflection of labor relations in the text: on such a reading, if class relations are absent in the narrative, this is more than a problem of reference (knowledge), it is a social problem (ideology) while classes exist. The conflation of reflection with reference that concludes class is absent in Kafka is itself a class narrative that not only provides an apologetic for inequality but also distorts the intelligibility of narratives that are not exhausted by their content, as Lenin’s labor theory of reading shows in its understanding of a nonmimetic reflection. The labor theory of reading is needed to turn reading from being quietist and complicit with the dominant culturalist ideology and make it a struggle practice for social emancipation and equality.

### EPILOGUE: “*BEFORE THE LAW*” – READING CULTURE MATERIALLY

Kafka’s writings and their “readings” have become not only a layered cultural signpost but also a threshold in critical and cultural theory. In their analyses of Kafka, Lukács and Derrida, to take two of his most careful readers, bring out not only the complexities of his texts but also mark the way in which the act of reading itself has become a complex and materially consequential cultural practice.

In reading Kafka’s “Before the Law,” Derrida, with meticulous attention to the working of rhetoric in the text, makes reading the practice of teasing out the singularities that put in question all generalizations about the text, including its own laws of genre. “Before the Law,” he argues, is a text of “subversive juridicity” (*Acts of Literature* 216) that, “owing to the referential equivocation of certain linguistic structures” (216), “does not tell or describe anything but itself as text” (211) and therefore “tells us perhaps of the being-before-the-law of any text” (215)—including the law of literature that, Derrida maintains, is evident “when the categorical engages the idiomatic, as a literature always must” (213). Derrida problematizes the law of

literature (fiction) through the idiomatic in the way that the title "Before the Law" is both positioned "before" the "story" of the law as well as within the first sentence of the story ("Before the Law stands a doorkeeper"<sup>7</sup>), a doubling that renders the identity of the literary "undecidable":

The former, the title, is before the text and remains external if not to the fiction then at least to the content of the fictional narration. The latter is also at the head of the text, before it, but already in it; this is a first internal element of the narration's fictive content. And yet, although it is outside the fictional narrative or the story that is being told, the title (*Before the Law*) remains a fiction. . . . We would say that the title belongs to literature even if its belonging has neither the structure nor the status of that which it entitles, to which it remains essentially heterogeneous. (*Acts of Literature* 189)

This doubling suggests that "the law had entitled itself" (189) in the displacement of the words "Before the Law" from its place in the fiction to the place of the title, which is supposed to be the "nonfictional" identity that grounds the text in the institution of Literature, as it simply "refers" to the "story." The law of literature, whose "inside" is supposed to be fictional while "outside" it theory (science) and practice (politics) are not, is thus deconstructed and the text reveals a "fictive narrativity . . . without author or end" (199), which is as much "the origin of literature as the origin of law" (199). "Before the Law" is thus a text that enacts the performative "idiomatic" basis of the general (law) by showing how the general is always dissected by the singularity of its performative iteration.

Derrida goes on to show how the law—which, as the country man assumes, "should surely be accessible at all times to everyone,"—never materializes its presence because of a series of delays and deferrals. The country man, for example, only prevents himself from entering as he is not prohibited (" 'It is possible,' says the doorkeeper . . . ") so much as delayed by the "guarded" appearance of the Law and the "terrible" aspect of the doorkeeper ("in his fur coat, with his big sharp nose and long, thin, black Tartar beard"). The undecidable appearance of the Law as both accessible and guarded, a prohibition that does not prohibit anything so much as perform it, as the doorkeeper suggests by his own placement outside the Law because of another absent doorkeeper ("so terrible that even I cannot look at him"), reveals, according to Derrida, that the Law is in actuality a fiction, as "nothing really presents itself in this appearance" (*Acts*



of *Literature* 191). Rather, the appearance “fuels desire for the origin” (197), and in this sense, Derrida argues, “Kafka’s text tells us perhaps of the being-before-the-law of any text” (215) that “the law of the law . . . is neither natural nor institutional” (205), its origin does not lie in class oppression, for example, and its secret is rather that it does not repress so much as allow “oneself [to] be enticed, provoked, and hailed by the history of this non-history” of “pure morality” (191), as the categorical command that says “you must not” (192) always just as much as it says “you must” (192). Derrida seems to argue that if power is necessary to thinking about the law (or, as he puts it, “if the nobility is necessary” [205]), that is so only because of the desire of “the lot of ‘guardians,’ critics, academics, literary theorists, writers, and philosophers” (215) that depend on “the legal personality of the text” (185) as a form of property and who therefore presumably have an interest in deferring access to the “secret” of the law: that, “The secret is nothing” (205). “This is the secret that has to be kept well” (205), in Derrida’s reading, in order to “fuel desire for the origin”: the desire that authorizes the contemporary “system of laws and conventions” (185) as much as the desire for their subversion. But what could be more comforting to the dominant than that their dominance has no basis to critique and that it is merely a conventional (consensual) mode of capturing desire? Derrida’s “desire-full” reading is a commodified reading that places desire in a beyond and thereby naturalizes the division of labor that systematically produces desire in opposition to need, providing the exploiters with the means to desire from the labor of others and relegating the majority to unmet needs. To read the problem of reading as a desire for proprietary rights and to propose an endless deferral of such rights, as Derrida does, is to install an ethical reading practice in which the individual is empowered over the collective and which thus fails to problematize the bourgeois right to exploit workers.

Derrida provides an immanent reading of “Before the Law” that subverts the binary of truth and fiction in order to conclude that conclusions are not only unnecessary but impossible and that any law defers us to other signifiers without end. Thus, “the work, the opus, does not belong to the field, it is the transformer of the field” (*Acts of Literature* 215), and “none receives an answer” in reading the cultural text “that does not involve *différance*: (no) more law and (no) more literature” (215). In this way Derrida underwrites the very ideology he puts in question by maintaining the fiction that law is “pure

morality," a merely formal and empty universal standing outside the political economy of the contemporary real.

Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Kafka, although putting itself forward as a "political" (*Kafka* 7) and even "revolutionary" (18) reading, turns the political into a question of free speech—by, for example, detailing the ways the tropic reversals of the Kafka text demonstrate the blockage and flow of "desire," which is itself presented in an ahistorical and post-ideological way.

Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Kafka is a rather traditional close reading that severs the text from its social and historical reality on the grounds that their reading is non-interpretive and thus closer to the way the text itself works. "We believe only in a Kafka politics that is neither imaginary nor symbolic" (*Kafka* 7), they assert, because of what are basically stylistic considerations, because, they argue, the signifiers in Kafka are not attached to definite signifieds but rather are "lines of flight" or, in other words, moments of conceptual opacity that are taken to exceed and to spontaneously resist "meaning." What is being called "political" here is a violent reinscription of bourgeois reading, reading as a transcendental moment of plenitude above and beyond social conflicts. Such an ahistorical ideology of reading, of course, relies on a rather traditional empiricism that assumes that knowledge of the object or text adheres in the text itself and is unmediated by language and ideology: "We believe only in a Kafka experimentation that is without interpretation or significance and rests only on tests of experience" (7).

Not only is their reading itself, however, a reading that dogmatically takes its own presuppositions as self-evidently factual and therefore mystifies its own participation in the ongoing contestations in reading, but it does not do what it says it will, which is demonstrate the way in which Kafka's text is "free" of "reflecting" the social real. What they in fact do is take the very thing about Kafka that needs to be explained, which is the question of how to read the way in which he inscribes agency at the level of materiality and explain it away by repeating an idealist theory of agency as absolutely "free" of material conditions.

Deleuze and Guattari's is a speculative reading because it cuts off Kafka's text from its implicatedness in ongoing social praxis by treating it as a self-enclosed relay of tropes that open up ("deterritorialize") and close off ("reterritorialize") the pleasure of the subject in reading (*Kafka* 4). They claim that they "aren't even trying to interpret, to say this means that" (7), and that they are simply describing those

moments of pure material opacity in the text itself, such as “how the intrusion of sound occurs in Kafka” in such a way that it “cuts it off from all its connections” (4), for example.

What interests Kafka is a pure and intense sonorous material that is always connected to its own abolition—a deterritorialized musical sound, a cry that escapes signification, composition, song, words—a sonority that ruptures in order to break away from a chain that is still all too signifying. (*Kafka* 6)

Their assumption, of course, is that “signifying” is “territorializing” and contains desire to normative conventions of pleasure, as against the significations of experience (as “non-signification”) in a text, which provides a kind of pleasure in subverting the containing drive in signification.

The reader is thus taught to read Kafka in a post-ideological matrix that Deleuze and Guattari take as the limit of the political. Thus, the “problem is not that of being free but of finding a way out” (*Kafka* 7) of this problem by always reading “within” the terms of the text as a “rhizome,” “assemblage,” or “desiring machine”—as a self-enclosed and free-floating space filled with “states of desire, free of all interpretations” (7). What such an immanent reading does is reinscribe “territoriality” as a systemic logic while displacing it to the locality of the text so as to immunize the text from a symptomatic reading whereby its tropic moves are seen to reflect ongoing and consequential social conflicts of intelligibility over the shape of the social real.

When Deleuze and Guattari consider the politics of the text in an extratextual way, it is a merely cultural politics that opposes a “minor literature” to a “major” one on the grounds that “minor literature” is “revolutionary” because it uses the “major literature” for constructing a “collective assemblage of enunciation” (*Kafka* 18), or, in other words, it seeks to extend the freedom of speech to cover marginalized cultures. Not only is this not a revolutionary reading, because it contains freedom to merely formal terms and does not grasp the need for economic freedom, but its politics do not go very far either if the point is to advance collectivity. Where is the advance in collectivity if all politics must reinscribe the dominant terms, and collectivity must be always already assumed to be “minor”? This is the reduction of the political to the stylistic. Furthermore, it does not take style very seriously by cutting it off from the class struggle.

Lukács begins his materialist reading of Kafka at this very point because he reads in Kafka's style—"the attenuation of reality" in his texts—a reflection of the "terror generated by the world of imperialist capitalism...where human beings are degraded to mere objects" (*Literature and the Class Struggle* 52). In Lukács terms, to cut Kafka's style off from "its social basis" (47) is to mystify the politics of style, which is a matter of how "the social structure of imperialism" impacts on "the bourgeois intelligentsia" (73). Thus "the crucial question" posed by Kafka, Lukács argues, is

whether a man escapes from the life of his time into a realm of abstraction—it is then that angst is engendered in human consciousness—or confronts modern life determined to fight its evils and support what is good in it. The first decision leads to another: is man the helpless victim of transcendental and inexplicable forces, or is he a member of a human community in which he can play a part, however small, towards its modification or reform? (80–1)

The task of the reader in materialist reading is thus a "critical" and not "libidinal" one: to "establish by examination of the work whether a writer's view of the world is based on the acceptance or rejection of angst, whether it involves a flight from reality or a willingness to face up to it" (83). This entails asking a rather sharp question in reading the text:

is it able to include—or, better, demands—a dynamic, complex, analytical rendering of social relationships, or whether it leads to loss of perspective and historicity. (82)

Lukács' reading of Kafka is critical and dialectical. It is not a dogmatic reading in the way that an immanent culturalist reading is, because it does not assume the text as "static" and self-enclosed, spontaneously resistant to the production of "meaning" ("the Law of *différance*"). Thus, my reading of Lukács argues against a "formalist" interpretation of his work as providing, as Lunn puts it, a "philosophical underpinning for...socialist realism" (77). Lunn argues that because Lukács "reduced works of art (including literary techniques) to reflexes of class ideology...modernist forms such as those of expressionism were apparently tied indissolubly to late bourgeois ideological decay and thus could not be transformed to serve other purposes" (85). This view of Lukács' work fails to take into account his dialectical account of literary form, which militates against all formalist solutions in art for what are in actuality intractable class conflicts. Rather

than imposing some set of formal prescriptions as a guarantee of a predetermined meaning and effectivity, Lukács' materialist reading of culture grasps the meaning of the text and of literary technique as the site of conflicting class structures that militate against any singularity of meaning in a world more and more "transfer[ed] into the proletariat" (Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" 494). Furthermore, his materialist cultural theory does not fetishize the way that literature must inevitably reflect the reification of social life under capitalism because, as Lukács' argues, texts carry an inevitable protest of "the diabolical character of the world of modern capitalism" (77) as well. In Kafka's case, this protest of capitalism is precisely located in the very realism of detail that Derrida, for example, sees as the "idiomatic" expression of a disavowed desire inscribed in law that is essentially "free" of history.

Derrida can only see in the "terrible" aspect of the doorkeeper a trope of castration because "in his fur coat, with his big sharp nose and long, thin, black Tartar beard," the doorkeeper suggests the phallus in imagery as well as effect, since in seeing him the man from the country "decides that it is better to wait until he gets permission" to enter. Yet Derrida does not see in this detail the trappings of feudalism and its symbols of rank radically out of joint with the impersonality of the Law and the abstract freedom it demands under capitalism. While the "terrible aspect" of the doorkeeper is in keeping with the extra-economic form of coercion demanded by the feudal division of labor, with which the "man from the country" is familiar, we can assume, at least his reaction seems to suggest so because it gives him fearful associations, its application on the Law as he encounters it, "open, as usual," and precisely "accessible at all times and to everyone" as he expected to find it, reflects the contradiction of the Law under capitalism in which the worker must freely submit to his own exploitation. Thus, whereas Derrida concludes that the appearance of the Law, which precisely prohibits while provoking a desire because of its categorically imperative form ("you must-/not"), thus placing the man in a position to "decide" to prohibit himself, a materialist reading finds in such self-contradictory details a trace of the "silent compulsion of economic relations" (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, 899) that is the real "secret" of the Law under capitalism. The Law under capitalism does not need the extra-economic coercion of precapitalist social formations because in capitalism inequality is primarily economic not political. What the text reflects, therefore, using the terms of Lukács' materialist reading, is not a "fixed" (logical) contradiction good for all and for all time, as Derrida's deconstructive reading posits, but a historical contradiction

that has unavoidable effects on representation, rendering it internally inconsistent as well as socially and personally unsettling.

Lukács' reading of the material real in Kafka is the opposite of Derrida's nonreading of the real as displaced desire. For Lukács,

Kafka is one of the very few modernist writers whose attitude to detail is selective, not naturalistic. Formally, his treatment of detail is not dissimilar to that of a realist. The difference becomes apparent only when we examine his basic commitment, the principles determining the selection and sequence of detail. With Kafka these principles are his belief in a transcendental force (Nothingness)... But the problem cannot be approached formalistically. There are great realistic writers in whose works immediate social and historical reality is transcended, where realism in detail is based on a belief in a supernatural world... In Hoffmann, realism in detail goes hand in hand with a belief in the spectral nature of reality... Kafka is more secular than Hoffman. His ghosts belong to everyday bourgeois life; and since this life itself is unreal, there is no need of supernatural ghosts... But the unity of the world is broken up, since an essentially subjective vision is identified with reality itself. The terror generated by the world of imperialist capitalism... where human beings are degraded to mere objects—this fear, originally a subjective experience, becomes an objective entity. (*Realism* 53)

Lukács is here implicating a deconstructive reading that assumes that “extreme subjectivism, the static nature of reality, and the senselessness of its surface phenomenon, are absolute truths requiring no proof” (72) by revealing the class basis of this view as “a certain way of looking at reality” (73) that does not see “what goal history is moving” (59) toward due to the “strong counter forces” (91) at work in the world that are productive of social(ist) collectivity.

“Kafka” is a cultural sign of the logic of reification in capitalism—what has already been theorized above as the immanent culturalism of the dominant discourses. Kafka's “Before the Law” follows a (post)modern culturalist logic by his surfacing of the contradictions of daily life under monopoly capitalism and mystifying any causal systemic explanation for them. What the spectral reading of Kafka is blind to, and what materialist reading emphasizes, is its “protest” of the system of monopoly capitalism that transforms daily life into a regimented life regulated by the logic of the commodity (exchange value)—culture as “mere training to act like a machine” (Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”). In the spectrality of its details, “Before the Law” registers the fact that capitalism as it

develops must alienate all social activity and productions to serve the rule of profit, so that nothing in the end is able to remain a local and self-enclosed activity but rather entails an invisible global system for its production. The fetishism of detail in Kafka is in reaction to this impersonal machinery that has overtaken the social relations. Derrida limits the materiality of Kafka's text to epistemological terms by only seeing in its details an "idiomatic" implication of the concept of the general (law).

However, materialist reading does not idealize the "protest" embedded in Kafka's text, as it is finally merely cultural in its assumptions and effects. Kafka's works presuppose a kind of bureaucratic reason run amok—where even those institutions which are supposed to provide a space of freedom from the market logic for the subject (such as the family, romantic love, the law, etc.) are themselves reproducing the dominant logic—that finds its negation in a voluntary leap into "absurdity," an existential act of empty negation that puts a seal of condemnation of the system as a whole—"inhuman" ("since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it."). What Kafka shows is the systematicity of commodity fetishism in daily life. What he does not show is the equally systemic negation of this logic in the production of the collectivity of labor, the material force that has produced and is alone in a position to control the "machine."

The one-sided presentation of the socialization of production in Kafka has effects on the understanding of "reflection" in materialist cultural theory. On Lukács' reading, Kafka capitulates to the general process of reification necessitated by extension of the logic of capital over more and more areas of social life, which, as a consequence, turns literature from being a force for change to one of reaction by strengthening the grip of necessity over cultural productions. For Lukács the role of literature is to "de-reify" the social and "demand . . . a dynamic, complex, analytical rendering of social relationships" that can guide humanity in its struggles toward a realm of freedom. On Lenin's terms, however, this means that culture is expected to have a realistic "mimetic" function rather than an ideologically "reflective" one because it assumes that "consciousness" can take the place of collective praxis as the agency of social change. Social relations cannot be "de-reified" in consciousness while classes continue to exist. The socialization of consciousness can only assume a class basis under capitalism, and every representation of social relations and the relationship of humanity to nature until then is necessarily class divided, supporting either bourgeois or proletarian interests. For a materialist

cultural theory to advance the cause of social equality, it must base itself on a labor theory of culture. Else it will risk reifying the material world and fall into a merely pragmatic understanding of culture that works within the dominant terms that construct the naturalness of the cultural real rather than challenge these terms with the root knowledge of class.





## CULTURAL THEORY AFTER THE CONTEMPORARY

### CULTURAL THEORY IN SEARCH OF A MARKET

Cultural studies has become exhausted. A mark of its exhaustion can be seen when Lawrence Grossberg asks, “How did cultural studies get so f\*\*\*\*\* boring?” (8) and takes the boredom as a sign that “cultural studies has failed” (“Does Cultural Studies Have a Future?” 8). It seems for a moment that Grossberg will open a productive and enabling inquiry in cultural studies in one of its premiere journals, of which he is an editor, by going beyond the self-evidency of boredom as a sign of the ineffectivity of cultural studies, simply because it is not popular, and arguing that cultural studies is “boring” because of its “culturalism” (24), which has “disembodied and disconnected [power] from the material relations of inequality and domination that are its anchor in everyday life” (12). Despite this passing insight, however, his way of engaging the “boring” is not to make cultural studies more materialist and read boredom as an ideological symptom rooted in the exploitative structure of daily life and to argue for cultural studies to engage with the causes of inequality. Instead he reads the boredom on its own terms and, in the manner of a crisis manager, proposes that cultural studies needs to be made more appealing by offering novel experiences. Grossberg’s cultural studies is a commodity and, like any marketer, his job is to increase his share of the market by manipulating the surface features of the product so that it appears “new” in relation to the other products on the shelf while claiming that it has been substantively improved. On the assumption that cultural studies has become boring because of the “limited ambiguity of the concept of culture” (8) that gives a reductive view of culture as “ideology” (22), Grossberg reads the “boring” not as a political issue but as basically an aesthetic matter to be addressed by what he

considers to be a more exciting view of ideology as discourse. It does not matter that cultural studies long ago abandoned the concept of ideology, as too reductive, for the more flexible idea of discourse, which reifies power into localities (e.g., “where there is power there is resistance,” Foucault, *History* 95). The point is to make cultural studies look “new and improved.” Thus, for Grossberg the energies of cultural studies will be revived not by recommitting itself to a materialist analytic of culture that brings to bear upon the haze of daily life the sobering reality of class inequality, but by pluralizing the concept of ideology into a merely descriptive term for the “geographical differences amongst specific configurations of capitalism” (5). Never mind that cultural studies has largely abandoned the concept of ideology as false consciousness of class and turned it into a “thick description” of the surfaces of everyday life and has dismissed critique as a totalitarian imposition upon the pleasures of consumption. Grossberg’s more ambiguous, and therefore presumably more exciting, concept of culture is itself the very culturalist understanding that has been dominant since the early ’70s. (If anything is boring . . .) By pluralizing capitalism into different geographical localities, Grossberg’s “more ambiguous” concept of culture does not escape the ideological but simply maintains the very culturalism that he himself acknowledges has led to the exhaustion of cultural studies to begin with, because it disconnects power from the material relations of production from which inequality comes and renders the social as basically an aesthetic matter (“configurations”).

Despite his opposition to the reductiveness of the concept of culture as ideology (false consciousness), Grossberg has no problem with the reduction of culture to the aesthetic, which is to say ideological, terms of culturalist discourse. But the aesthetic in his text clearly has a class interest. On his “figural” understanding of the contemporary as different inscriptions of capital, the assumption is that “culture continues to be dominant in the current conjuncture” (17) because “financial capital . . . investment is more important than labor as a source of wealth” (15). It seems that Grossberg’s passing observation that cultural studies has failed because of its culturalism is simply a way to suggest that as he is aware of the problem of the incorporation of cultural studies into the dominant ideology he would never do it himself. He then proceeds to do exactly that as he performs a reification of capital that dematerializes its material basis (class) by representing the economic base as the geographical configurations of (dis)investment. The result is that capital rather than labor appears to be the source of wealth and the motor of change. It is, finally,

for class reasons, in short, that culture is depoliticized in Grossberg's discourse as "not in the last instance about ideology" (22) and given an aesthetic value by being made to seem more ambiguous. In his cultural theory, wealth is no longer produced in the "social metabolism" (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I) between labor and the material world, but is a matter of individual choices in the market, which is to say that the social is an effect of mind. Grossberg wants to further the ambiguity of culture in the "hope" that this will liberate our minds to "imagine new futures and new strategies for realizing them" (5). He makes capitalism a superstructural matter of the local patterns of investment that follow what are for him the ambiguous movements of knowledge rather than the global ratio of exploitation inscribed in wage-labor, which demands a critique of the surface appearances of capitalism. For all his opposition to the concept of culture as ideology, his argument turns out to be precisely one in which it is expected that culture must serve market imperatives, which in his text means that culture must be made to seem ambiguous in order to further the wealth-creating activities of financial speculation. And yet his concept of culture fails to examine the material basis of capital and wage-labor relations in its pan-cultural understanding of capitalism as market configurations even as it complains about the lack of an adequate theory of materiality in contemporary cultural theory and the political crisis this entails for cultural studies.

Grossberg's understanding of "the material relations of inequality" (12) is itself a culturalist understanding of inequality that acts as more of an ethical acknowledgement to manage the crisis of cultural studies. It is not an actual explanation for why in the midst of the global accumulation of wealth evident today the majority continues to not even be able to meet their needs and how these facts impact upon culture. According to him, what constitutes inequality are the global patterns of investment through which wealth is generated by market choices. Inequality will therefore change, presumably, with a "reconfiguration" of investment into new global patterns. But such a reconfiguration does nothing to change the basic class relation inscribed in wage-labor, however, and in fact equates the achievement of equality with the equalization of the terms of exploitation, as any new geographical configuration of capitalism depends upon the continued existence of the private appropriation of surplus labor. The global normalization of capitalism is thus equated with the realization of equality in Grossberg's cultural theory, as in the bourgeois ideology of the free market. It is this apology for capitalism, rather than opposition to it, that has actually placed cultural studies in crisis,

so that it has come to be irrelevant for grasping the contemporary and made ideology critique come to seem boring to the dominant, who want to move on to something new and exciting at a time of increasing inequality. What is new and exciting to them, it turns out, is another rewriting of capitalism that “disconnects power from the material relations of inequality and domination that are its anchor in everyday life” and normalizes the current global division of labor.

Grossberg’s text is part of a wider turn to deconstruction in the cultural theory of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century as an “ethical” response to the global inequality of transnational capitalism that renders the social a regime of signs and proposes surface reconfigurations in the attempt to suppress the need for a materialist cultural theory and root change. Deconstruction has been the primary means whereby cultural studies spiritualizes materiality as a question of values and secures its place in the State apparatus of the academy, which safeguards the “truth” that capitalism is here to stay as it co-opts any and all opposition. The deconstruction of the concept of culture as ideology that Grossberg performs, which turns culture into a self-circling motor of wealth creation on the “hope” that this will empower the people and end, or at least lessen, inequality, is part of a more general institutionalization of deconstruction in cultural studies that abandons even the pretense of “resistance”—which has been the project of cultural theory since the Enlightenment—as any opposition to capitalism is now perceived to be unappealing in the logic of the market. Gary Hall, for instance, writing in a special issue of the online journal *Culture Machine* devoted to bringing cultural studies closer to deconstruction (*Deconstruction is/in Cultural Studies*), argues that the concept of culture as ideology in cultural studies “reduces cultural studies to being merely an expression of its particular social and historical circumstances” and dismisses it as an “uninteresting” and “boring” form of cultural studies that needs to be opposed by a more “unreadable” understanding of the contemporary in which “it cannot be decided in advance that capitalism and globalization are, in every singular instance and manifestation, unambiguously bad.” Hall, without a tinge of irony, shows no awareness of the fact that it is precisely the “ambiguous” and “unreadable” concept of culture in cultural studies, what the journal title markets as “new,” which separates culture from consideration of class relations (exploitation), that has placed cultural studies in the service of capital, or, to use his own words, “reduced cultural studies to being merely an expression of its particular social and historical circumstances” and made

it a structure of repetition, which always concludes that capitalism is “open” to surface rewritings and revision. Rather than understanding cultural studies in materialist terms, Hall tells a story about cultural studies in which movements within knowledge are determinate and capitalism is immunized from critique. In the introduction to the issue, of which Hall is an editor, the current state of cultural studies is thus described as “a general drift away from ‘theory’ and ‘back to reality’ and the political and the economic” that has “marginalized” deconstruction and therefore “excluded” what is “difficult,” “provocative,” and “vital” in theory. The “reality” of cultural studies, its indifference to the social relations of inequality, is gray and alienating and makes the editors of *Culture Machine* uncomfortable and so they have decided that what is needed is to “liven” it up by reaching for the same old theory that has made cultural studies socially irrelevant to begin with (deconstruction). As the slash in the title of the issue indicates (*Deconstruction is/in Cultural Studies*), the journal will not be committed to examining the causes of what it calls, in the words of the introduction text, the “‘post-theoretical’ urgency” that has “taken place within cultural studies over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s,” but to rendering the relation of cultural studies to deconstruction “undecidable,” therefore reifying theory from its basis in contemporary class conflicts, as deconstruction has always done. What is being called “a new sense of the political” by the journal is thus not a situating of theory in the new global struggles—which, of course, has been the theoretical project of cultural studies all along and not just a recent “post-theoretical” “sense of urgency” that has overtaken it as their revisionist account has it—but a return to a past of theory that was dominant when a lower level of social contradictions allowed theory to present itself as meditations on the aporias of language as free of the material conditions that shape all knowledge. In Hall’s view, returning to a past less politicized moment of cultural theory will have the singular effect of revitalizing cultural studies in the current conjuncture, as “the deconstruction of identity essentialism” cannot be explained as caused by “global capitalism’s production, hierarchization and exploitation of difference” and therefore, presumably, provides a basis for “agency.” But clearly the deconstruction of identity is a euphemism for the bourgeois takeover of cultural studies, because Hall has no problem with thinking of deconstruction in terms of identity as when he claims it represents the “voice” of the dispossessed that has “reconceptualized the world from their perspective and asserted the power of the marginalized.” The

deconstruction of identity as grounded in the social relations of production and its reinscription as the voice of the marginalized is not only logically contradictory but also a class strategy to make culture appear unconnected to the economic roots of inequality that actually explain power relations and to instead claim that power is a matter of representation, or, more commonly, the freedom of speech. The freedom of speech, however, is not a basis of freedom—it simply regulates the terms of the outright theft of labor power and boosts consumption. Freedom is always an economic matter that comes with the triumph over necessity. The equation of freedom with speech and representation is simply an ideological maneuver to make the freedom of capital to exploit labor appear universally good while deflecting attention from the roots of inequality.

Deconstruction functions as an “ethical materialism” in cultural studies today: an evasive oscillation between idealism and mechanical materialism. As in Lukács’ theorization of “romantic anti-capitalism,” it is an amalgam of “‘left’ ethics and ‘right’ epistemology (ontology),” (Preface to *The Theory of the Novel*). While it suggests that the dynamics of historical change is objective reality, it uses “ethics” to deal with the objective reality. The objective reality of capitalism, for example, is formally acknowledged as a “global” logic only to promote a cultural opportunism that represents change as a local and contingent outcome, a move that displaces the logic of class (which is a matter of necessity) with the logic of desire (the alea of “chance”).<sup>1</sup> Such an ethical materialism is useful to contemporary cultural studies to contest the more obvious contradictions of capitalism only to more effectively mystify its underlying basis in the exploitation of labor; in doing so it makes its own reformism look like a radical alternative to capitalism and its contradictions and gains political credibility. What makes deconstruction so “vital” and “exciting” to those such as the editors of *Cultural Studies* and *Culture Machine*, who see it as necessary for rescuing cultural studies from materialist critique, is that deconstruction—despite its deep conservatism and regardless of the fact that what is being represented as “new” has been a highly institutionalized discourse since the late-’70s—provides them with a historical imaginary of a capitalism that has canceled its basic class contradiction and an ethical justification that promises that in the “new” capitalism social inequality is a matter of discourse that will change through its rewritings.

In the discursivist cultural studies, deconstruction represents a commitment to a view of the social as the space of differences without

antagonism that changes with changes in representation.<sup>2</sup> Such a discursive view of culture relies on two primary assumptions:

- Culture is material in itself as it is no longer tied to socioeconomic relations and therefore cannot be conceptually grasped as a totality (logocentrism).
- Culture is ruled by the “free play” of the signifier, which is assumed to have its own immanent laws (*différance*) independent of history (as class struggle).

On these assumptions the discursivist cultural theory posits a break in history in which the present cannot be understood in terms of the ongoingness of exploitation, as capitalism is thought to have canceled its basic contradiction inscribed in wage-labor and become a regime of signs.<sup>3</sup>

This culturalist story about a “new” capitalism, which unlike the old capitalism based on exploitation is no longer exploitative but radically democratic because it is based on knowledge rather than labor, is perhaps nowhere more compellingly made, compelling, that is, if analytical subtlety and stylistic facility are any indication, than in the writings of J. Hillis Miller, who could be called a reconstructed deconstructionist for the way he updates Paul de Man’s literary theory of ideology for cyber-capitalism. Miller rescues de Man’s theory of ideology—which was discredited as “linguistic fascism” because of how it turns ideology into a matter of epistemic confusion that separates it entirely from power—by updating it in the language of cyber-culture. Thus, according to Miller, “it is not so much language as such that generates the delusion of ideologies, but rather language as moulded by one or another medium” that does so (*Dialogues* 129). This shift of register in ideology from the medium of language to media in general underwrites a historical imaginary in which an “epochal cultural displacement” (127) is said to have occurred from “the book age” to “the hypertext age” (127) that militates against “a diagnostic or constative response, that is, a description or critique of the present situation” (135), because the “new technologies . . . confound all . . . inside/outside divisions” (126) as they “exploit the strange propensity to dwell in fictional or phantasmal spaces that each human being has” (129). The deconstruction of the inside/outside is made an incontestable ontological reality in Miller’s theory rather than being simply a discursive analytic to desediment foundational understandings of the real, as in classical deconstruction, and carries profound implications for grasping the



contemporary. For instance, in these terms Miller argues that whereas “the economies of the self, the home, the workplace, the university, and the nation-state’s politics...were traditionally ordered around the firm boundaries of an inside-outside dichotomy” and relied upon “the regime of representation or a certain kind of mimesis” between “extra-linguistic things as they are and the representation of those things in language” (132), the “new electronic space, the space of television, cinema, telephone, videos, fax, e-mail, hypertext, and the Internet” have insured that the “private space has been invaded and permeated by a vast simultaneous crowd of ghostly, verbal, aural, and visual images existing in cyberspace’s simulacrum of presence” (126) such that ideology can no longer be considered a misrecognition of reality but rather must be seen as having the “power...to intervene in history and makes things happen” (129). It is the performative misappropriation of reality due to ideology on Miller’s account of the contemporary that constitutes “that seemingly irresistible force for globalization, the World Wide Web” (128) that has abolished all “rigid boundaries...between one person and another, one class race, or gender and another” (132) and empowers all equally to “create the truths” we take to be “self-evident” (136). Therefore it follows, in Miller’s cyber imaginary, that the inequality we see in the world is a language effect that only continues to exist because of a too “rigid” and “polarizing” (mimetic) use of ideology that remains blind to its “unforeseeable” and “impossible” (performative) uses as “new forms of co-operative human praxis” (136) at a time when “the opposition between representation and reality...disappears” (133). According to Miller, technology has empowered the mind to create its own reality (ideology) above and beyond class relations, and it is precisely the insistence on addressing the extralinguistic causes of social inequality that, ironically, produces the inequality in the first place by exempting individuals from participating in the “coming community” (citing Agamben, *The Coming Community* 136), thereby fostering conflicts and delaying the realization of “new forms of co-operative human praxis.” Ending class inequality is equated with changing our ideas about class from being understood as a material antagonism to being a kind of collective ritual.<sup>4</sup> Such a shift does nothing to end class inequality, of course, but simply reinscribes class inside culture where it appears that all are equal in terms of representation. It would be difficult to find any fundamental difference between Miller’s account of the contemporary and the one represented by the Bush aide who is quoted to have said that the world is divided between a “reality based community” of people who “believe that solutions emerge from your

judicious study of discernible reality,” on one side, and “history’s actors,” on the other, who, in touch with “the way the world really works,” maintain that “we’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality” (Suskind). There is a rhetorical difference, of course, in that Miller seems to take it to heart that some will feel alienated and at a loss in the brave new age and so he presents it in a more utopian and subtle (less brutal?) language.

Deconstruction initially appeared at a time when capitalism was dismantling the welfare State on a world scale and its knowledge industries were primarily directed against Marxism as the materialist theory of history that combines the movement for democracy with the need to end the exploitation of wage-labor/capital relations (Duménil and Lévy). At that time, deconstruction was primarily concerned to disrupt all binaries as instances of logocentrism, which was considered a totalitarian formation of knowledge that depended on a hierarchy of value in which technocratic reason was made sovereign at the expense of marginalizing the poetic freedom of language and the aesthetic pleasures it offers, such as the joy of semic discoveries and the novelties of grammatical experimentation. With the global expropriation of socialist property on a world scale following the destruction of the Soviet Union and the consolidation of neoliberal global capitalism, the intellectual commitments of deconstruction have changed. Now, rather than providing a rigorous analytical display of the rhetorical foundations of Truth (with a capital T) by revealing them to be grounded on the differential and undecidable slippages of signification, deconstruction is more concerned with consolidating its own epistemological speculations as an incontestable dogma immune to critique. Derrida’s late texts thus display a less experimental play with language and are more concerned to legitimate an idealist tradition in philosophy from Kant to Heidegger and are deeply respectful of religious themes and concerns, thereby making deconstruction more and more at home in religion departments. In an interview released a few years before his death, for example, Derrida argued that God is the “absolute third” (*A Taste for the Secret* 71) that grounds all binaries, the proper name for that “unconditional” limit (“there has to be a limit,” 64) that represents “the best shared thing in the world” in which “we have nothing in common” (58), now that “language is no longer a region” and has “won the totality of space” (80). God, according to Derrida, is the “common capital” (86) that “we draw on all the time . . . that makes it possible to understand one another” (86) above and beyond material differences such as “language, culture, place, home” or “communities, of property and ownership” (85). Leaving

aside the allusion to Bourdieu's field theory of capital that turns capital into a symbolic rather than economic matter,<sup>5</sup> such a religious limit to knowing must be insisted on, according to Derrida, "for something to happen" (64) in the first place, "something non-thematizable, non-objectifiable, non-sharable" (57) that will force a "dislocation of the present, which renders the present non-contemporary to itself" (7) and insures that philosophy will not be limited to a "social welfare service" (7) but "would at best reinforce incoherence" (13). For Derrida, deconstruction is just another name for "what happens" (82) in "a world in the process of changing, and thus of 'deconstructing'" (81), which rather than provide a transformative knowledge of the present in cultural theory puts in its place a story about knowledge as a performative game that imagines change comes about primarily through what are held to be mysterious symbolic processes that will come to insure individual liberty and, therefore, that nothing need ever change in a socially emancipatory way ("social welfare").

Derrida's *A Taste for the Secret* provides an occasion to examine the ethics of deconstruction and its values for cultural theory. This text is aligned with a collection of others, from those of the leftist sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to those of the conservative pundit David Brooks, in addressing class issues while turning class into a cult(ural) category and in place of providing a reliable knowledge of inequality grounded in the exploitation of wage-labor makes class into a mysterious congeniality of taste existing above "communities, of property and ownership" (85). Perhaps the most explicit deconstruction of class as need and the reinscription of class as taste occurs in Derrida's text when in response to the question, "Why deconstruct?" he answers,

I must confess that I cannot answer the question: Why deconstruct? To what end deconstruct? If deconstruction is anything but an initiative of my own, or a method, or a technique, but what happens, the event one takes note of, then why go in that direction? Why make the situation worse? Should it be remedied? Should it be reconstructed? . . . one has to know if one is *for* or *against*, if one is happy about it or not, and if one wishes to accentuate the process or slow it down. It is here that I have no answer (82). I am not the bearer of a universal reason on the basis of which I justify the fact of speaking of one thing rather than another . . . rather I recognize a sort of affinity . . . There is no justification but there is congeniality. (84)

Such statements of mystical belonging (congeniality) depend on a primary disavowal of the "interestedness" or "partisanship" of

knowledge that is formed by its implication in the existing class structure in which the interests of the ruling class have the privilege to appear “universal” and “true,” and thus a disinterested statement of just the way things are, while any opposition to the dominant arrangements must therefore appear as disingenuous and disrespectful of the norms of civilized discussion. When discussing deconstruction, Derrida deploys such depoliticizing language by referring to deconstruction as an “event” inscribed in the real itself, rather than an analytical method or technique, for example—deconstruction is just “what happens” (82) in “a world in the process of changing, and thus of ‘deconstructing’” (81). Whereas deconstruction used to provide a rigorous analytics of figuration in a highly abstract language whose effect was to render the text opaque to the point of seeming material in itself, thus disrupting easy access to the real that was seen as a mimetic illusion, more recently Derrida had appeared in films and given interviews with friends while assuming a more informal style in which the presuppositions of deconstruction are left unexamined and dogmatically assumed to be commensurate with the real as such on the claim that “language is no longer a region” and has “won the totality of space” (80). I realize that in the leftist imaginary of the dominant cultural studies it will be argued that Derrida is problematizing such depoliticizing language in *A Taste for the Secret* when he asserts that “desire” or “taste” is behind all knowledge, in a way similar to Nietzsche who argued that philosophy is a mode of life, or biography, which like all texts establishes its coherence by marginalizing other modes of knowing. However, in actuality such a move gives desire a metaphysical primacy (“will to power”) and turns existing social antagonisms, which are rooted in the structure of property and demand material resolutions, into cultural differences, which can only be endlessly described and metaphorically elaborated, making them seem effectively eternal and immutable and thus, it is “hoped,” “resistant” to instrumental co-optation by the ruling order in the historical imaginary of cultural studies today. But if “congeniality” (affinities of taste) is what shapes the social, which is a way to say desire rather than need explains the existing, the critique of the existing rooted in the class analysis of capitalism is what deconstruction is most firmly set against, and for necessary, not merely cultural, reasons: because such an analysis uncovers the basis of taste in the exploitation of labor as well and lays bare the cultural masquerade for what it is—a tired justification of privilege. It is in the defense of class privilege that the enemy of deconstruction and freedom itself, in Derrida’s discourse, is thus the “totalitarianism of democracy” (59) or, in other words,

“a public space that makes no room for the secret,” which is that “I have a taste for . . . not-belonging” (59). Derrida’s “not belonging” is, of course, highly ironic, given that deconstruction has been an institutionalized discourse in the West for the past thirty or so years that, like all such discourses, mystifies its material basis in class society and thereby serves a very decidedly conservative function to make the way things are appear as the way they should be.

Unlike a traditional ethics that bases itself on a normative view of reason that attempts to derive the good from the true, the ethics of deconstruction has abandoned the search for truth as a reliable foundation and understands reality as primarily an aesthetic matter so that the good becomes a matter of taste, or, what is good for “me.” Its mode of addressing issues of inequality is basically to turn them into instances of linguistic confusion (*mimesis*) that spontaneously self-deconstruct in the spectral exchanges of cyber-culture ruled by the (a)logic of desire. A deconstructive ethics grounds itself intellectually in the ambiguous status of truth in modern cultural theory, which traces itself in the writings of Kant, for instance. In Kant’s theory, for example, although the ethical is derived from the rational, the basis of reason itself in empirical reality is held to be essentially unknowable (*noumenal*) so as to allow for the free play of imagination that is taken to be an expression of the essential autonomy of the subject. Kant argued that human dignity was compromised by the utilitarian philosophy of bourgeois society by taking individual self-interest as its basis. On Kant’s view, a utilitarian ethics limits the understanding of human nature and therefore curtails its freedom. By contrast, Kant seems to argue that, as reality is essentially unknowable, any ethical theory must therefore take account of the incomprehensible motivations of individuals who do not always act in rational ways according to their interests because of their basically imaginative relation to reality. Kant’s “categorical imperative,” which mandates that others be treated as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end, is, among other things, a cultural opposition to the utilitarian philosophy of the market because it understands the individual as essentially a spiritual entity for whom materiality functions as a negative limitation of freedom. In a deconstructive ethics the supplemental relation between imagination and reason put forward in idealist philosophy since Kant, in which objective reality appears to depend on imaginative faculties, is thought to undermine the possibility of securing a universal good as it bars access to any positive and reliable knowledge of material reality (essence). Rather, following the reversal of causality in Nietzsche’s writings (*Will to Power* 293–300), the real itself is made

a matter of the figurations of truth inscribed in cultural practices, thus rendering the materialist project of cultural theory an essentially undecidable and contingent matter. The figural is then understood as culturally material rather than strictly imaginative in a subjectively interior way, as it was in classical idealist philosophy, while at the same time materiality is understood pragmatically as a creative tropological force with the power to reconfigure the real rather than simply the negation of human freedom. However, by de-linking agency from the subject and making it immanent to the real itself (as textuality and “hauntology,” Derrida, *Specters of Marx*), a deconstructive ethics cannot advance the knowable good (social equality), which demands the recognition and understanding of the workings of material causality, and thereby does what religion has always done, which is to reconcile the subject to getting along with what is rather than fighting to change it.

Ethics has always attempted to derive the good from an immanent rather than transcendental concept of truth as in religion, but like religion it has always opposed a materialist conception of truth (causality) and thus reinscribed the ideological function of religion to mystify the social relations. In materialist cultural theory, on the contrary, the good is seen as arising from the “social metabolism” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I) between labor and nature at a certain moment of development, which establishes what is true in practice in accordance with human need based on what the primary conditions make possible: “Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation” (Marx, *Contribution* 21). To reiterate: Before there can be a culture of consent and resistance over the socially consequential meaning(s) that shape people’s lives, there first needs to be their material life itself. In materialist cultural theory, culture is connected to daily life on the recognition that it has an economic root in labor: the “process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, 283). Thus, in materialist cultural theory, “freedom,” “equality,” “ideology,” “ambiguity,” “unreadability,” “oscillation,” and so on, *all* cultural values, are neither simply derived from our wants nor are they an effect of the (de)limitations of knowledge or the cultural inscriptions of truth, but, rather, they are terms whose meanings are always determined in relation to social labor time. The transcendental ethical, logical, and aesthetic values of ancient societies about the good, truth, and

beauty, which are held to be divine in origin, are actually the effect of a hierarchal social order based on a low level of technological mastery of nature that tended to remain static for long periods of time because of the limits of surplus wealth produced in the conditions of slavery, so that these values were seen as fixed for all and for all time, and what was considered good was whatever reproduced the ruling order. With the expansion of the market into agricultural products and along with this the extension of market relations in Europe in the early modern period, the social wealth greatly increased and demanded the resources of the entire world for its arena of activities; the “free worker” was thus compelled to develop his “individuality” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, 1019–38). Truth then came to be more and more understood as relative to human practices and the good came to be seen as that which augments human creativity. As the contradictions of capitalism ripened and the rottenness of the system began to reveal itself, it could no longer be legitimated in universal terms of humanity, and yet legitimated it must be in order to insure the reproduction of the class relations that are its basis. A deconstructive ethics was at home in late, transnational, cyber-capitalism because the value it placed on contingency and undecidability allowed for the displacements and contradictions of the system driven by profit-motivated technical innovations and violent social interventions while reifying materiality as figuration and textuality, thus mystifying the social basis of these brutal and irrational social relations and helping to promote commodity fetishism (consumerism).

The assumption authorized by deconstruction that cyber-capitalism is constituted through a ruptural event that liberates cultural singularities from the logic of history such that the present can no longer be understood in terms of exploitation is in actuality only possible because of the general economy of history (labor time). The notion that culture (ideology) is material in itself, for example, is only explained concretely by investigating what Marx calls, in a draft text of a chapter of *Capital* Volume I (“The Results of the Immediate Process of Production”), the “formal subsumption of labor under capital”—that is, the alienation of wage-labor in which the “social character of his labour confronts the worker as something not merely alien, but hostile and antagonistic, when it appears to him objectified and personified in capital” (1024–5). It is the expropriation of labor from the means of production in the form of private property that gives culture the appearance of autonomy and self-movement enshrined by deconstruction, rather than the singularity of cyber-capitalism as a “post-al” (post-Fordist, postmodern, postindustrial,

and so on) regime. Prior to capitalism, culture primarily consisted of a religious worldview that justified inequality in terms of a divine order of things (the Great Chain of Being) so as to normalize the division of labor in society in which the ruling class lived by appropriating the surplus product of the toiling class. By separating the worker from the means of production (the enclosure of the communal lands) and technically rationalizing the work process, capitalism transformed labor from being bound to craft traditions in which work consisted primarily in the production of use-values to a socially abstract form undertaken for wages and productive of surplus value. Separated from the immediate labor of the producers, culture is no longer tied to the ideological reproduction of the given conditions of production and comes to seem autonomous. The commodification of labor makes culture serve as an economic compulsion on the worker to submit to being exploited because labor is no longer for the direct satisfaction of needs as in precapitalist cultures but rather for their expansion in a commodified culture. The change in labor from being primarily a use-value for meeting the worker's (and landlord's) immediate needs to becoming an exchange-value to be bought and sold on the market is due to a change in the mode of production that destroys the organic conception of culture of premodern societies. The cultural politics of the bourgeois revolution thus consisted in liberating culture from its ties to Church and State—culture was thus considered “free” when its ideas reflected the freedom of the individual possessor of property in Enlightenment theory. Furthermore, at a certain moment of production when it becomes no longer feasible, given the terms of competition, to produce surplus value absolutely by, for example, lengthening the working day or cutting wages directly, capital “revolutionizes” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, 1021) itself by assuming control of its own valorization and from that point on realizes relative surplus value for the most part by incrementally increasing the ratio of surplus to necessary labor through technological innovations. Marx calls this moment of the self-valorization of capital on its own terms the moment of the “real subsumption of labor under capital” and understands by this that capitalism has reached the point that it can no longer simply maintain the worker at a given level of subsistence but requires the worker to become a cultured person to engage with the more complex production process, thereby diversifying the worker's needs, so as to increase the rate of profit. Marx discusses how “increasing diversity in modes of working” through technology favors the “development of *versatility among the workers*” (1026–7) and “allows for the worker's *individuality*” (1032) by



providing “an incentive to develop his own labour power” (1032) by acquiring new needs, such as “newspapers” (1033). As a consequence, whereas before “men were . . . forced to labour because *they were slaves to others*; men are now forced to labour because they are *slaves of their own wants*” (Marx quoting Steurt 1028), as the worker’s “existence and that of his family depends on his ability continuously to renew the sale of his labour power to the capitalist” (1031). At the moment of the real subsumption of labor by capital, culture becomes an absolutely economic imperative as Marx explains (1037)—liberated from all fixed limitations it becomes an “end-in-itself” to augment the value of labor in the context of increased (and “much more violent,” 1028) exploitation. More violent because the worker is no longer able to increase the value of his labor power through extra-economic means and is forced to prove his value solely in terms of the production process itself to the extent that he internalizes the “consumer lifestyle” while adjusting himself to the downward pressure that increasing productivity puts on his wages. The “constant development of *new forms of work* . . . corresponds to the diversification of use-values” and through this process the “free worker” (1031) of capitalism “is impelled by his wants” and develops a “related feeling (sense) of *responsibility*” (1031) and “*learns to control himself, in contrast to the slave, who needs a master*” (1033). Culture, in short, is reified as a realm in itself by capitalism, which requires it to perform a primarily economic function to commodify the worker’s subjectivity in accordance with the needs of production rather than, as in precapitalist society, being simply a political tool to create consensus for the existing order, for example. The primary value of culture today is to foster diversity at the moment in capitalism when the socially necessary labor time needed to reproduce the relations of production has greatly decreased due to the technical efficiency of the production process, and the stimulation of needs—which function as the markers of cultural identity and the differences around which “culture wars” and “lifestyle” politics are formed—becomes an economic necessity because of the falling rate of profit produced by the increased economic efficiency in production. It is in these global conditions of labor that culture comes to seem the source of wealth and labor itself is naturalized as a transhistorical creative force (immaterial labor, emotional labor, cultural capital, and so on) that all equally possess, rather than what it actually is: “a system of slavery” in which “the wage worker has permission . . . to *live*, only in so far as he works for a certain time gratis for the capitalist,” a system that only “becomes more severe in proportion as the social

productive forces of labour develop” (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*).

Difference, the (a)logic of desire that drives the slippages of signification and undermines all fixed reference, is not the “law” of the singular whose unpredictable vacillations disrupt history as culturalist discourses represent it, but itself *reflects* in an ideologically inverted way the logic of the general economy. Deconstruction (which is the logic of culturalism) is in actuality a reflection of the “diversification of labor” (*Capital* Vol. I, 1028–34) that, as Marx explains, is brought about by the rising organic composition of capital driven by the law of value (profit accumulation). By making the singular the disruption of the historical and in excess of the social logic, deconstruction places the singular beyond conceptuality and actually turns the singular into a stale generic ideology in support of what exists. The singular is always tied to the transformations of the totality, and the space of freedom it promises will only become real on a new basis in which labor is not exploited and the social logic is no longer production for profit but “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*).

### THE MESSIANIC LEFT

The cultural “resistance” within the circuits of exchange enshrined in cultural studies, which celebrates aesthetic values as a sign of spontaneity and the liberation from norms, is in actuality an index of the values of older forms of labor that have become unproductive to capital coming into conflict with the new terms of the more productive labor. Take for example the way Melville’s *Bartleby* has become a folk hero on the academic left because the form of his refusal (“I would prefer not to”) is read as a singular act of rebellion to the ruling order because it refuses not only to obey a command but also to provide a reason for the refusal, as the lack of positive knowledge is considered to be what is singular about cyber-capitalism as a regime of writing (knowledge work).<sup>6</sup> “*Bartleby*” has become iconic in cultural theory for a new politics of a new capitalism in which wealth and inequality are made a matter of mind. Whether understood thematically as simply a refusal of work (Negri and Hardt, *Empire*), or figuratively, as a new form of praxis (Žižek, *Parallax View*; Agamben, *Potentialities*), *Bartleby* functions for the transpatriotic left as a scriptograph in which capitalism has outlived its basic contradiction inscribed in wage-labor and become the only basis of human freedom. The celebration of cultural resistance in cultural theory is a form of romantic utopianism of a

locally regulated capitalism, capitalism with a human face, that serves to disguise the needs of global capital in rationalizing labor through its production and development of the “free worker” who is economically compelled to cultivate her individuality, or else lose everything. Cultural resistance displaces the agency workers only possess collectively in production in material antagonism with capital and replaces it with a bourgeois model of agency in the superstructure where agency seems a matter of the purely voluntary acts of individuals. In actuality, the individual is only capable of putting already appropriated surplus value in motion (i.e., exchanging wages for articles of consumption), subsequent to submitting to her own exploitation.

Modern cultural theory since Kant has been concerned to liberate culture in terms of individual aesthetic sensibility from the “leveling” imperatives of the State, on one hand (hegemony), and the homogenous logic of the market, on the other (commodification). Culture was seen as an elusive middle term that, because of the ambiguity of reference embodied in judgments of taste, disrupted totalitarian regimes of signification as such, especially in the writings of the Frankfurt School, which saw in the defamiliarizing effects of aesthetic discourse a form of resistance to the “instrumental reason” of “consumer capitalism” (Grant, “The Cultural Turn in Marxism”). In the cultural theory of the generation of ’68 that followed from the Birmingham school of cultural studies, the project of aesthetic resistance was located in more popular forms and consumption in general was understood as the locus of resistance that promised the space of freedom. Cultural studies understood “resistance” not only as a form of opposition to entrenched power but also as an attack on Marxism for its cultural “elitism,” because its materialist critique of ideology is based on a positive knowledge of economic necessity lying outside the spontaneous experience of everyday life. At the same time, cultural studies is indebted to Western Marxism for its argument that culture has become the arena of struggle in “consumer capitalism,” which is seen as depending for its reproduction on inculcating certain values, such as productivity, calculability, and legibility. One of my tasks in this book has been to distinguish an even earlier materialist cultural studies in classical (orthodox) Marxism, which sees culture as an arena of class struggle and ideology critique as a means to wrest a realm of freedom from the grip of necessity, from a later cultural studies that understands capitalism as itself an effect of social struggles over values, in which critique is made the other of pleasure, and agency is understood as an individual aesthetic liberation from norms, rather than the economic freedom from necessity. My argument entails

looking at how changing definitions of capitalism in cultural studies have explained the actual changes in capitalism throughout the twentieth-century, from Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, Adorno, Jameson, Hall and beyond. Broadly, there are two contrasting conceptions of capitalism in cultural studies:

1. The first is *Marxist* in that it understands capitalism in terms originally outlined by Marx and Engels as based on the extraction of surplus labor in production. Culture is ideological on this view because it is subsumed by capital and thus functionally related to increasing profits.
2. The second is (small m) *marxist*, or marxian, and understands capitalism in much broader terms as universal alienation brought about by the tendency of capital to rationalize production and regulate people's lives, as Lukács, Gramsci, Adorno, Benjamin, Jameson, and Foucault argue.

The latter argument is culturalist in that it defines the social whole in terms of one of its parts (rationality, efficiency, calculability) and is therefore actually self-canceling in its premises, in that it claims to be materialist and opposed to reification. Furthermore, this culturalist position is utopian because it defines capitalism in religious terms as the negation of spirit (culture), which it places in the zone of the singular, excessive, and incalculable (the Messianic). This idealist utopianism actually unites the marxism of the Frankfurt School with the institutionalized discursive cultural studies of today, despite the populist understanding of culture that has replaced the earlier high aesthetic understandings of Lukács, Adorno, and Benjamin, for example, that is usually taken to be the most important difference in (post)modern cultural theory. The focus on culture as a self-acting cause that exceeds the (socio)logic of the real is itself a bourgeois ideology of culture meant to promote consumerism and counter the falling rate of profit. The defense of such an ideological notion of culture in cultural studies in more or less populist language needs to be contrasted with the critique-al understanding of culture in classical Marxism. The writings of classical Marxism have always argued for a view of culture as a weapon in the class struggle. They have thus demonstrated what was revolutionary in the writings of, for example, Hegel, Balzac, Tolstoy, or Kafka to the extent that their writings revealed that "consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life" (Marx, *Contribution* 21), and, as well, have explained what in their writings represented a reactionary

apologetics for exploitation, as when their writings maintained, on the contrary, that it is “the ideological forms in which men become conscious . . . that determines their existence” (21).

The assumptions of deconstruction have turned cultural studies from being a materialist critique that implicates knowledge into the political economy of the real to being an apologetics of inequality that makes knowledge the primary matter of society and underwrites the volunteerist subject of capital. An example of this is in Derrida’s insistence, in his late texts, that as “language is no longer a region” and has “won the totality of space” (*Taste for the Secret* 80) it provides the opportunity to force a “dislocation of the present, which renders the present non-contemporary to itself” (7) by insuring a sense of “not-belonging” that inaugurates a “democracy to come.” Although Derrida can be seen to be appealing to Benjamin’s concept of “messianic time” that the latter had theorized as a necessary tactical maneuver “to blast open the continuum of history” (Benjamin, “Theses” 262) in the manner of “revolutionary classes at the moment of their action” (261) at a time when the class struggle was more organized around State agencies, Derrida’s religious language is considered too alienating to be truly radical now and its premises have been updated in more recent cultural theory that has returned to the more revolutionary rhetoric of (small m) marxism as a corrective, as in the texts of Badiou, Žižek, and Agamben.

Agamben, for example, argues that Derrida’s theory of language is too idealist, as it takes language on its own terms and does not confront what is truly unsettling in the human experience of it. Agamben seems to understand a purely immanent theory of language to be an expression of “the experience of manufacturing work” (*Infancy and History* 105) and therefore conservative as it cannot produce the “authentic concept of historicity” (106) he takes to be “resolutely revolutionary” (111). For Agamben the outside of language is not a “transcendental signified” within language that attempts to halt the play of signification and secure meaning, as Derrida argues, but “the experience of the difference between language and speech” (60) that “marks out the human from other living beings” (59) and “opens the space of history” (60). By maintaining a semiotic concept of language indebted to Saussure’s general theory of it as *langue*, a system of “differences without positive terms,” Derrida, according to Agamben, reinscribes the Western metaphysical separation of language (culture) and humanity (nature) even as Derrida must assume that language constitutes the human rather than being the instrument of man who is its origin, as in Aristotle, for example. According

to Agamben, linguistics “never arrives at a chronological beginning of language, an ‘anterior’ of language” (56) not because “there is no outside text” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*) but because “it is a speaking man that we find in the world, a man speaking to another man, and it is language whereby man is defined as man” (56), not because man is “an animal endowed with speech” (59) but rather because man is a being whose “nature means being always-already inside language” (59) experiencing the difference between language and speech “painfully” as “the inability...to take possession of his own historical nature” (109). Agamben understands his linguistic theory as a historical materialist (99–115) one because it achieves “a more authentic concept of historicity” (106) by confronting “man’s original historico-transcendental dimension” (60) as a being whose nature is constituted socially by being alienated in speech; but on his theory, as in Derrida’s immanent theory of language, “any such [extra-linguistic] conception of the origin of language” such as labor is “fatuitous” (56). And yet, the origin of speech is not auto-poesis, it does not lie in the use of language for its own sake, nor is it primarily for man’s spiritual self-definition and realization, as religious discourses maintain. As Marx and Engels explain:

Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life. (*German Ideology* 37)

Although, as Marx and Engels theorize, “language is as old as consciousness” and “only arises from the need, the necessity of intercourse with other men” (49), this is the case because it is “practical consciousness,” because it takes part in what they call “the first historical act... the production of material life itself” (47) through labor. Agamben’s “more authentic concept of historicity” is precisely one that depends on erasing from view the prehistoric and pre-linguistic dependence of humanity on nature, or, in other words, the coexistence of humanity and labor that necessitates language in the first place. Moreover, his understanding that the difference between language and speech as “man’s original historico-transcendental dimension” and a more authentic, and therefore more effective, mode of being in the world than that provided by philosophy is not actually proven by the “natural sciences themselves” (*Infancy and History* 56),

as he claims. Agamben claims that such a self-enclosed view of language is scientific because it nullifies causality and does not rely on a notion of “a primary cause which separates in time a before and after” (56) and thereby reaffirms experience (60). By defining man as an entity who must experience his own being as a painful separation from nature due to speech, rather than a species being that must (re)produce itself through the practical interaction with nature, Agamben actually defines humanity in terms of consciousness and makes man a spiritual being, as in religion. When Agamben therefore argues, following Benjamin, that a revolutionary theory of history consists precisely in the cancellation of time (99) and the recovery of meaning, he is making praxis into an aesthetic act because the “continuous origin” (60) of man that constitutes the “first historical act” that “founds history” is understood as primarily undertaken for reasons of spiritual recovery rather than a material act of subsistence grounded in actual sociohistorical conditions.

Agamben’s theory of language as the expropriation of experience that founds history as an alienated discourse has profound implications for grasping the present and has made him a popular figure in the knowledge industry after 9/11. Using Benjamin’s argument that the “state of emergency” invoked by sovereign power as a means to bolster its rule at times of crisis has made the suspension of law and rule by violence the norm of modern life, Agamben argues that the metaphysical separation of language and the authentic human experience of it extending in philosophy from Aristotle to Derrida has become the central political logic of society today that justifies a condition of “bare life” in which individuals “can be killed but not sacrificed,” that is, killed outside the coverage of legal norms, which would give their deaths a ritual collective meaning (*Homo Sacer*). Agamben is seen as a radical figure because of the way his theory, taking the U.S. concentration camp at Guantanamo as a universal model, understands democracy as demanding a violent curtailment of freedom rather than providing for its realization, because of how it normalizes the regulation of life and thus leaves it bereft of authentic experience and unique meaning. But his theory of (bio)politics separates power entirely from class interests by considering politics purely from the point of view of how it gives us to understand the meaning of our lives (experience). In consequence, what is considered material in Agamben’s theory is the experience of power rather than its objective causes. Thus, according to him, “politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of human

action and of human thought" (*Means without End* 117). Agamben thus succeeds in making power an eternal fact of life, a medium to express human nature, rather than a historically developed means to impose class rule and normalize exploitation. The result is that the sphere of human action and human thought is radically curtailed in his own theory in a way that accommodates itself to, rather than challenges, the status quo. If power is the medium of human existence and its present expression is necessarily radically nihilistic because it projects its own operation onto nature and mortifies people's experience, how is Agamben's own prescription that change comes about through a new conception of power as "a sort of dispossession of the self" in which "your life becomes a work of art... without the artist" (Interview 613) a challenge to it? The resignification of power as a self-creative act simply makes a virtue out of necessity through a trope, as religion has always done. "Bare life" is a condition of absolute dispossession that produces compensatory illusions of authentic being while negating a truly free and creative life, in the same way that, for the bourgeois, morality is always "higher" than mere survival, demanding an indifference to the latter because inequality is a fact of life. The unsaid, of course, is that the moral view of life is a product of class relations in which the needs of the dominant class are met from the labor of others.

Slavoj Žižek too has opposed deconstruction in the name of dialectical materialism while coming to exactly its same conclusions about the contemporary as a post-exploitative moment of freedom. In *The Parallax View*, for example, he argues that *différance* now functions as a "neologism whose very notoriety obfuscates its unprecedented materialist potential" (11) to reveal the "minimal difference" (11) between the Symbolic edifice of cultural meanings and its foundation in the Real, "the hard bone of contention" (26) that constitutes a "fundamental *social fact*... that undermines every narrative solution" (19). But in Žižek's psycho-marxist logic the real is not a product of "collective praxis" (5), not, in other words, a matter of a "social antagonism ('class struggle')" that is "an effect of objective socioeconomic forces" (11). He thus argues it is necessary to "rehabilitate... dialectical materialism" (4) as the "philosophical underpinning of Marxism" (5) by rejecting "the philosophically naïve notion of thought as a reflection/mirroring of being (of 'independent objectively existing reality')" (6). Rather, for him "the gap between the individual and the... social is to be inscribed back within the individual himself: *this objective arche of the social Substance exists only insofar as individuals treat it as such, relate to it as such*" (6). Why Marxism has failed,



according to Žižek, is because to “elevate society” into a “general ontology” (7) that explains thought as its “reflection” cannot explain the “negativity of thought” that he takes to be a “withdrawal into reflexive distance from being” (6). It turns out that Žižek’s rehabilitated and more enlightened view of materialism basically amounts to the moral platitude that the belly comes first in the order of things and before we can address the big issues we must first take care of ourselves. He thus can only conceive of thought as a “withdrawal from being” or a naïve conformism to the “general ontology” and cannot conceive of an integrated human praxis in which thought arises out of objective conditions as their approximation and a guide for transformation. The result is catastrophic for Marxist theory because it turns a “radical intervention” (6) from being a critique of the “multitude of appearances” (26) that covers over the material roots of inequality so as to change it into a kind of moral sermon that provides an “infinite judgment” (5) on the present from a position that assumes “the speculative identity between the highest and the lowest” (5) and thus “cuts diagonally across all particular groups” (9). And this sermon preaches that “the loss of substantial communal identities” (9) affects us all. As with Derrida, for whom theory “would at best reinforce incoherence” (*A Taste for the Secret* 13), for Žižek too it consists of “confronting a universality with its ‘unbearable’ example” (*Parallax View* 13) on the assumption that the loss of meaning is more important today than losing one’s means of subsistence by having one’s life depend on working “for a certain time gratis for the capitalist” (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* 535). In other words, theory must be “ethical,” on their view, or it is nothing at all in a world in which nothing matters anymore anyway because what matters is always what matters to “me.”

### LEARNING TO LIVE (WITH CAPITALISM)

The cultural resistance enshrined as agency in cultural theory has been practically co-opted by the market and not only functions as its ideological apology but also serves to maintain the level of profit by providing the consciousness skills for what have become vital technical innovations for capital, and for managing the consequent social displacements. The co-optation of cultural studies by the market, which has made the project of ideology critique seem boring to its canonic defenders who want cultural studies to aestheticize the world for capital, is more clearly evident still in the publication of such books as *Everything Bad is Good For You* (Steven Johnson) that simply bypass

the radical lexicon of cultural theory and embrace the pleasure of consumption as a necessary skill for negotiating the cyber-culture of today. In the popular idiom of self-help books, Johnson takes the themes of cultural studies—such as how the singularly “overdetermined” nature of contemporary society exceeds the possibility of reliable knowledge (critique) and how “pleasure” is therefore an enabling cultural practice because it disrupts the dominant norms – and presents them as ready-made cognitive skills available in popular culture, such as video games, that are tailor-made for getting along in cyber-capitalism.

Johnson is dismissive of the academic cultural studies because he sees it as caught up with merely “symbolic” understandings of culture whereas culture on his understanding is like “man-made weather”—a kind of excretion produced by the biological (brain) and technological nexus of today’s hi-tech capitalism. Instead of investigating the unity of base and superstructure in which culture has a subordinate relation to the class structure, he assumes an organic view of culture, ultimately indebted to Hegel, and posits their identity—culture thus “expresses” the kinds of ideas required by the social environment. Such a view of course depoliticizes culture as an arena of conflicts, hence Johnson’s assumption that culture is a matter of “competence” (skill) without “ideology” (class). It should be pointed out that cultural studies itself opened the way to the total depoliticization of culture (the Oprahization of culture as therapy for getting along) by de-linking the superstructure from the base through “mediations” (the self-circling “complexity” of culture that has subsumed the social and canceled the opposition of nature and culture too in textuality). Johnson’s book sets up its terms for a therapeutic account of culture by dismissing critique as “moralizing” because it is obsessed with “meanings” (the message) and “progress” (or improvement). On these terms, critique thus fails to realize that there are many truths, not just the logical kind, of which, he asserts, the most important of all is the “emotional intelligence” that is necessary for living in today’s highly mediated world where it is not always possible to discern the meaning. Given this thesis, it is of course to be expected that the book does not give a logically coherent account of the contemporary cultural moment but, with the drive-by velocity of a TED talk, takes the form of outlining with bullet point clarity what it assumes to be self-evident truisms, such as:

- Book learning and school are not as important as life experience and in some ways actually are harmful because they are “outdated” and “moralizing,” that is, they do not offer as many “choices” as popular culture and therefore do not offer as many opportunities

to make decisions that exercise the brain and prepare it for today's complex social environment.

- Knowledge should not have a necessary result that leads to decided conclusions about the way things should be because (a) the world is a complex place and it is not always possible to know, and (b) admitting that it is not always possible to know is a more trustworthy character trait and therefore more persuasive (being persuasive is a necessary leadership skill in today's world).
- Knowledge should be "pleasurable"—that is, offer many opportunities for making choices rather than limiting them to the certain and familiar ones—because it stimulates the desire to learn (as brain scans have proven dopamine is released in the brain as a reward for cognitive effort).
- Consuming popular culture is not mindless and unproductive entertainment because it is actually performing a form of "intellectual work" in the way it challenges the mind to explore and familiarize itself with "complexity" (plurality and ambiguity).
- Consuming popular culture—especially playing video games—will not make you a better person (nothing can guarantee that), but it will teach you basic things that are useful for managing the kinds of social interactions that are more and more required today, such as "problem solving" and "emotional intelligence."

That such points are not as clear and coherent as they may appear becomes evident by teasing out some of their unspoken assumptions with a few sharp observations. How is the argument that knowledge should be limited to getting along in the world as it is, and not for "improving" it, not itself a moral argument (and therefore outdated)? If "intellectual work" is just about learning how to "map" and "manage" with the world as it is and possesses the ubiquity of "man-made weather," why must the knowledge for transforming the world be dismissed and excluded through such books as *Everything Bad is Good For You*? Is complexity finally unknowable because it is not in our power to grasp it, or is this a rather simplistic view of both complexity and humanity (that rules all infotainment media, such as magazines like *Psychology Today*)? What about the ways humans ideologically "complexify" the world in order to subjugate others and the complex ways human labor has developed to interact with the natural world that prove scientific knowing is emancipatory? What about the people who do not have access to the electronic culture of the West—is it their lot in life to serve the masters who do possess such culture? Or, ironically, is the focus on popular culture and the commitment to

justify it as imperative knowledge about the way the world really is itself a form of mystification, a comforting story the West tells about itself at a time when it is no longer economically competitive with the technologies of China and India, more so when one hears talk about the multipolar post-Western world?

*Everything Bad is Good For You* shows how culture has been implicated in the political economy of the real—not only theoretically, as in the writings of Hardt and Negri, for example, but practically, in consumption and the ad copy that boosts it. Culture has become corporatized as “emotional labor” and made necessary for realizing profit by normalizing consumption, and it has lost even the slightest tinge of “resistance,” so one finds more and more talk about “cooperation” and “flexibility.” The incorporation of culture places the practice of cultural resistance in question, because it reveals such values to be manufactured by the culture industry itself and in no way to be considered a threat to capitalism. *Everything Bad is Good For You* is a cultural marker for the intellectual and political bankruptcy of cultural studies, which itself has abandoned even the pretence of resistance as “boring” and has embraced capitalism. The critique of cultural studies in class terms is today considered boring on the same logic as “everything bad is good for you,” because cyber-capitalism has done away with a universal good (theory for social equality) by making ideology the meaning of life in a world that has abolished the line between technology (culture) and biology (nature). What this means is that ideology critique is more than ever necessary now to, among other things, uncover the ways in which the dominant try to dissimulate, under an aesthetic and affective ruse, how the culturalist project to realize a society of equality within capitalism has failed and the discursive strategies of cultural studies are now more effectively taken up by the commodity.

The reaction of cultural studies to its crisis of knowledge has been to make culture an ethical matter and, under the guise of consideration for the practical consequences of cultural representations in the context of ongoing inequality, to abandon any pretense of resistance as a “bad” elitist value because of its residual opposition to pleasure (consumption). Take, for example, Jonathan Sterne’s contribution to a recent anthology (*The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies*) in which he writes in tones of boredom about the sheer repetition of critiques about its market populism. Sterne sees cultural studies as caught up in debates over culture as “use” (a means to an end) versus culture as “pleasure” (an end in itself), sharing a basic presupposition that he claims has acquired the force of a dogma—that culture is at root

a matter of production. He argues that, insofar as cultural studies theorizes culture as contestation over the shape of the social, when it is not being politically instrumentalist in its readings of pleasure as ideology it is equally instrumentalist in its aesthetic use of pleasure as “resistance.” Freedom, for Sterne, on the contrary, is said to reside in “feelings,” which he takes to be the basis of a new aesthetics of “meaningless, nondirected activity” (99). But Sterne shows no awareness of the fact that feelings have become incorporated as “emotional labor” and made instrumental for profit. His own “articulation” of the relations between feelings and the social that seeks to defend feeling on its own terms is itself evidence of the political economy of feelings—feelings as a space of freedom for recuperation from work.<sup>7</sup> Feelings as the zone of the private and the ultra of disinterested experience is, in other words, an effect of economics. For all of Sterne’s boredom with the materialist critique of cultural studies, he fails to advance the issue because he does not himself inquire into the contestations over “production” he claims are paramount—his own notion of the sheer pleasure of having feelings is, as a result, equally instrumentalist in its contrast to work as the paradigm of “production” he complains about.<sup>8</sup>

Production is the “paradigm,” if that is what it is, of culture in materialist cultural theory not because culture is the locus of effectivity as in the pragmatism of the market. Neither is it because culture is considered the source of value as in cyber-labor discourses about “emotional labor” being “creative.” The question of whether culture is useful or valuable in itself is already a highly reified understanding of culture that takes what is a social matter of the level of class antagonism and turns it into a subjective question of whether individuals engage in cultural activities because they want to realize an end or not, as in Miller’s opposition of “mimetic” communities that seek to describe and/or critique, and “performative” communities that produce the “new.” Such a moral understanding of culture assumes that individuals are something independent of culture, something material in themselves, because of the opacity of their desires. But the individual only exists in, and because of, a culture and in turn embodies the values that reflect the existing social conditions of production and the conflicts over it. Culture and the individual are coextensive with production and only have their existence in it. The separation of the individual as a model of agency from the social whole is a purely speculative abstraction, undertaken in Sterne’s case to “resist” the paradigm of production (“instrumentality”). And yet, this abstraction is also a real one necessitated by social relations—what is outside work

is structurally determined to be the zone of the private and individual because it is the site for the private reproduction and consumption of labor power under capitalism. Production is the “paradigm” of materialist cultural theory because culture has become primarily an economic matter and instrumental to profit accumulation. Without such knowledge of what is, it is impossible to change it.

Without an understanding of the labor relations that shape contemporary culture, student-citizens (workers) are inculcated in the regime of immediacy that cyber-culture instantiates, in which it is assumed that the subject is essentially a consumer who interacts with the real merely through signs and images and that the real itself has become virtual. An education in cyber-culture should rather enable the student to question such immediacy and what is being sold as agency and literacy—such an understanding from outside the immediate has always been the goal of the humanities, and it is fundamentally put in question in contemporary cultural studies and cyber-culture discourse.

Contemporary culture demands to be analyzed, not pragmatically within the terms of culture itself—which are actually the terms of empiricism and cognitive psychology more or less under the cloak of post-structuralist theory masquerading as cultural theory today—but conceptually so that its own terms are explained by re-situating them from the ground up (class). The problem with existing accounts of cyber-culture is that even the criticisms accept the fundamental premise of cyber-culture as a “new” phenomenon that causes the changes we experience every day and thereby maintains the social alienation of labor that is actually at the root of the rapid technological innovations as well as the reified thinking about technology. Cultural studies today ontologizes its own categories and takes what are primarily epistemological ways of discussing technology (for its impact on “how” meaning is constructed) as the limit of the real as such because of the supposed centrality of information technologies to cyber-capitalism. There is then no “outside” to cyber-capitalism because any outside presupposes “mediation,” which is seen as central to the reigning cyber-culture. What this story leaves out of account is the question: How did mediation (information processing) come to seem the universal law of motion of human societies in the first place? There is a difference, after all, between the local and concrete use of information for some particular end and the abstract universal requirement of information for society as such. How did society itself come to depend upon and thereby to exist because of information, if that is the case? Cyber-culture discourse for the most part assumes

that information and society are synonymous (there is no outside) and thereby conflates social relations with exchanges of “meaning” (signification). This means that it takes information exchange as the primary form of activity that constitutes society. But how are “meanings” more important than material survival? And to whom? The immaterial theory of the primacy of meaning in today’s society is that work has become knowledge work (Negri and Hardt, *Empire*), a “creative” force that is central to constituting society. On this view, “knowledge work” is more important than “manual” work because it has taken over the whole of society. But it does nothing to further our understanding of contemporary cyber-culture to see “cognitive work” as “productive labor,” on the argument that technological efficiency makes socially necessary labor impossible to calculate (as neo-marxists such as Negri, Read, and Witherford argue) such that the working day becomes a “fiction.” Rather, what this does is make it impossible to see culture in terms other than what are necessary for capital. The forms of “cognitive work” Johnson takes to be central to society, which are simply managerial skills, are actually unproductive forms of labor (circulatory activities). To consider them “creative” of a new sociality, as Hardt and Negri do, is simply to mystify the dominant social arrangements that require a “free worker” to feel responsible to her wants and experience her slavery to capital intimately as self-preservation. The productive intellectual labor is actually that which increases surplus value by reducing the necessary labor time required to reproduce the worker (i.e., lowers wage costs). This labor requires, as a consequence of its reproduction, the “diversification” of needs that workers are forced to acquire to remain competitive on the market. What Johnson claims is an “environmental” incentive, whereby technological changes trigger chemical reactions in the organism (dopamine), is in actuality “the silent compulsion of economic relations” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I, 899) whereby the law of value (profit accumulation) demands that workers increase their consumption while decreasing the cost of their labor—“intellectual labor” and “cognitive work” are what this more “rationalized” form of exploitation is called, in which the worker is “more violently exploited” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. I).

Current discussions of cyber-culture all assume that work is the primary activity of society, as if the purpose of life itself was wage-labor. Their solution to wage-labor is to revalue work as “creative” and aestheticize culture as so “ambiguous” and complex as to defy any “outside” (revolutionary) understanding. But how did work (utilitarian activity) become the universal form of all practice? In

other words, such accounts of contemporary culture beg the question: how are nonutilitarian (emancipatory) concepts of culture and work materially possible given the universality of “knowledge work” as the end of human society? Marx’s theory depends on understanding the transformation of nature by labor: an “outside” to labor that changes it. What is missing in cyber-culture discourse is an account of the self-negation of the new cyber work-culture—of how cyber work-culture produces its own negation in the form of a global revolutionary proletariat whose work does not meet its needs and indeed serves to brutally curtail them, thus necessitating an ideology critique of culture that furthers the collective project of transforming capitalism into socialism.

### CULTURE AS ALIENATED LABOR

A real, positive, account of cyber-culture would re-understand contemporary culture as social labor alienated from itself—cyber-culture as exploited labor. Cyber-culture has produced new ways of interacting with nature that allows greater control over it and that changes how we think about our own humanity—just look at the biotech industry. But these new powers and needs have been formed under the economic coercion of capitalism in which everything is made to serve profit rather than human emancipation. It is the enslavement of culture to capital that produces the cyber-culture discourse in which technology is given a spiritual value as “creative labor” to compensate for social alienation. A materialist account of cyber-culture, on the contrary, is not dismissive of it in the way that “affirmative” accounts of it are—which assume cyber-culture represents the “new” that cancels history—because it understands culture as the subjective side of the labor process that performs certain ideological work (to “invert” the material conditions and make them appear to be mental). Cyber-culture does the ideological work of capital, but not by simply asserting “what is” as what “ought to be.” Rather, it sutures “what is” to “what ought to be,” through the mediation of a discourse about technology having the utopic power to realize our hopes and dreams, on the assumption that the socially democratic project of Marxism has failed.

Thinking of cyber-culture as alienated and estranged labor raises some difficulties, of course. The first may be described as a thematic one in that cyber-culture itself includes the discourse of alienation but re-understands it as basically a cognitive matter—the subject as alienated from herself, the loss of personality (*Memento*, *The Matrix*,



etc.), or, in more sentimental discourses, alienation from the “love,” “security,” and so on offered by “community” (which new technologies of the self, like Web 2.0, as well as such activist neomelodramas as *Erin Brockovich*, *The Dreamers*, and *Wendy and Lucy*, promise to heal). In this way, cyber-culture naturalizes alienation as a fact of life and proposes itself as a therapeutic spiritual solution. The “new” cyber-culture in fact reinstalls some very “old” ideas in this way of addressing the cultural effects of capitalism, rather than its cause, in the exploitation of labor.

Take the crisis of the humanities as an example of the updating of the old as new. In cyber-culture discourses (Antonio Negri, J. Hillis Miller, Bill Readings, et al.) the crisis of the humanities is considered a result of purely demographic and spatial changes brought about by a new technological proximity to the other that calls patriotic intelligibilities into question. On this account, the nation-state is thought to depend on a certain regime of discourse that installs a fictive distance from the real (mimesis) that allows power to manipulate reality and so dominate those who do not possess the privilege of distance. Cyber-culture, it is argued, calls this subject into question by collapsing the illusion of distance and leveling all discourses so that none are seen to occupy a privileged relation to the real but rather the real is seen to be a performative construct open to multiple configurations. What is understood as “material” are the performative utterances with the power to determine the shape of the real by the intensity of their affect in the body of the viewer-consumer. Thus, in the writings of Nicholas Mirzoeff, the visual is the “locus of globalization” (*Watching Babylon* 3) engineered through the orchestration of “visual events” such as 9/11, which he sees as “the impact of the two dominant symbols of modernity’s triumph over the limitations of body and space—the airplane and the skyscraper” (*Visual Culture* 8). September 11 thus represents the spectacular inversion of the society of the spectacle that will, in the words of Michael Hardt, bring about a change in the “future orientation of financial markets” and provide a “prefiguration—albeit an inverted, distorted, corrupted prefiguration—of the liberation of the multitude” (quoted in Marazzi, *Capital and Language* 11). On these terms the dominance of capital is reduced to the dominance of its images over the viewer and will change with the subversion and replacement of these images as they impact on the bodies of the consumers of the spectacle. It is by embracing rather than opposing the ideology of cyber-culture that the humanities will prove its value in the “new” world here. This discourse assumes that the role of the humanities is basically conservative rather than

critique-al—to construct a new subject that assents to the dominant regime as his own creation rather than experiencing it as an alien imposition. But the shift from considering the real in conformity with the official consensual reality to thinking it as a performative effect abolishes the outside (socialism) and thus manufactures consent for what exists. By abolishing a critique-al outside rooted in the self-negation of capitalism, the liberal pluralist humanities (which supports the status quo) is rescued from the critique-al humanities. My point here is to emphasize how the “affirmative” account of cyber-culture gives it the power of change precisely on the grounds that it is already hegemonic and in this way it “naturalizes” in its conclusions that which it “negates” in its premises—that cyber-culture is, at root, alienated labor. The affirmation rather than critique of cyber-culture as alienated labor reproduces a very old story about “what is” as impossible to change (for what are assumed to be ethical, spiritual, affective, and such other “reasons”)—that capitalist hegemony is an innate expression of human nature.

More important than the thematic problem of seeing culture as a modality of technological mediation and hegemony is the conceptual problem that doing so entails naturalizing labor, insofar as it seems to assume that labor is a transhistorical ontological reality that resists change (a “creative” force). In actuality labor is alienated social praxis. In a world where humanity has mastered the productive forces of nature so as to meet its needs, the concept of labor as essential to humanity loses its meaning because human need will no longer be limited by its given natural requirements but will itself become a productive force. In other words, freed from the conditions of necessity that compel humanity to expend its energies in laboring activities for mere subsistence, these energies will be primarily expended in the transformation and expansion of needs through new social combinations and will cease to be alienating and coercive.

The highly globalized cyber-culture of today is transforming the senses and necessitating a global awareness that is highly distorted by bourgeois ideology and private property in the means of production. In cyber-culture discourses, capital is seen as the sole productive force and given highly symbolic meanings and quasi mystical status as “creative labor” and so on, while the systemic impoverishment of the working class is disappeared from view. It is not new technologies that are producing a “ghostly proximity” that has changed the traditional senses (from mimesis to spectrality), however, but the new international relations of labor that are doing so and necessitating what Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* call “communist

consciousness,” which is an awareness of the need to abolish labor in a world in which it has become not only unbearable but also the only mode of life. Cultural theory today is in awe of the creative power of labor, but it has nothing to say about what is to be done to change the brutal reality of the workers whose mode of life it is. The “end of work” is the mantra of the cyber-culture, which cultural theory has turned into the notion that work has become creative because of computerization and that therefore capitalism does not need to be overthrown. What is needed now is side taking with the communist consciousness that the global power of capital is producing an international revolutionary class unified by their conditions of life and the need to change it.

# NOTES

## 1 INTRODUCTION

1. See, for example, Marx and Engels on Balzac (*On Literature and Art*); Benjamin on Baudelaire (*The Writer of Modern Life*); and Jameson on Wyndham Lewis (*Fables of Aggression*).
2. Judith Butler, for example, calls the latter “Left Conservatism” because of its rejection of liberal pluralism.
3. For the original theorization of “post-ality” see Zavarzadeh, “Post-ality: The (Dis)Simulations of Cybercapitalism.”
4. See *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Agamben); *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Badiou); *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Žižek).

## 2 CULTURE AND ITS OUTSIDE

1. So popular is this story that the comedian Stephen Colbert has parodied it on his cable television show with the neologism “wikiality” (“truth by consensus” rather than fact), which is a portmanteau of “Wikipedia” (the user-edited online encyclopedia) and “reality.”
2. In the postwar period up to 1980 the value composition of fixed capital (that is, capital invested in raw materials, plant, and equipment that is necessary to set labor in motion) rose by over 77 percent, seeing the biggest rise in the mid-’70s, and the rate of profit fell by a third, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Statistics (Shaikh and Tonak, *Measuring the Wealth of Nations*). According to Shaikh and Tonak, corporate profits to corporate net stock fell 13 percent between 1969 and 1973, from between 11 and 15 percent to between 8.8 and 11 percent. It has since only risen to about 9.4 percent in 1996 (12).
3. Marx argues that the proletariat can claim “no particular right” (*Early Writings* 256) under capitalism because as a class of civil society it shares in the universal bourgeois right to sell its labor freely in the market while at the same time it remains a class whose cause of formation lies outside civil society in the fact of the means of production having been privatized in the hands of a few and the daily expropriation of labor power by the capitalists this entails as a consequence.

4. Derrida's "linguistic turn" in cultural theory is widely seen as necessitated by a historical break, as he himself has stated: "never as much as at the present has it [the *problem of language*] invaded, *as such*, the global horizon" (*Of Grammatology* 6). A "peculiarity of our epoch," he goes on to say, which occurs at precisely the same "moment when the phoneticization of writing . . . begins to lay hold on world culture" (4).

### 3 WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH MATERIALISM(S)?

1. "All the ontological classifications of ancient idealism express the badness of a social reality in which knowledge of the truth about human existence is no longer incorporated into practice. The world of the true, the good, and the beautiful is in fact an 'ideal' world insofar as it lies beyond the existing conditions of life, beyond a form of existence in which the majority of men either work as slaves or spend their life in commerce, with only a small group having the opportunity of being concerned with anything more than the provision and preservation of the necessary." (Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," 90)
2. Leaving aside that such a leap "outside" history is already "inside" it in the discourse of anarchism and can be traced through the writings of the Young Hegelians, to Stirner, Nietzsche, and Sorel, through the Surrealists, the College of Sociology (Bataille, Benjamin), and the Situationists, a discourse that, moreover, has always put itself forward as dissenting from the "orthodoxies" of dissent and a "third way" between capitalism and socialism and that has itself become the official discourse of the neoliberal state (deregulation), Žižek has taken to cloaking it as revolutionary Marxism ("Repeating Lenin"). But for Marxism "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" between "oppressor and oppressed" (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*). Hence it follows that "there is no middle way (for mankind has not developed any "third" ideology), and generally speaking, in a society torn by class opposition there could never be a non-class or an above-class ideology" (Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* 41).
3. The result of Žižek's rejection of Marx's labor theory of value is of course the obvious one: "I don't believe Bill Gates is exploiting his workers because he pays them relatively well" ("Monstrosity of Christ" 1:11:53). In short, exploitation is not a matter of production but market exchange that disappears when the terms of exchange are "fair." I leave aside how Žižek has already undermined the logic of "fair" that allows him to conclude there is no exploitation when he says that the logic of profit is "arbitrary" because it is determined through the use of juridical force (copyright). What is behind Žižek's illogic is the (ideo)logic of capital that mystifies the source of value in human labor.

4. This is perhaps most obvious in Žižek's justification of the 2008 bank bailout, on the argument that it was necessary given that the "real economy" depends on the "virtual economy," in the sense that everything has to first be financed in order to be produced (*Tragedy* 14). Leaving aside the fact that the bailout has not stimulated the "real economy" and unemployment continues to grow at a record breaking pace, finance capital is not productive capital that is invested in labor and machinery to realize surplus value but speculative capital that simply shifts money around and redistributes already produced surplus value. Žižek's inversion of the "real" into the "virtual" economy dissolves labor as the source of value into speculative financial transactions as if capital were the source of value. What is real is thus the "bottom line" incontestable Truth of the market over meeting people's needs for health care, education, housing, communications, and economic stability. The reality remains, however, that the "virtual economy" of financial speculation emerges out of the "real economy" due to the falling rate of profit relative to investment in the production process, which is why the "stimulus" has not stimulated investment and produced jobs as advertised.
5. See "Stylizing Global Protest: Latin America and the Media" (Tumino, *Nature, Society, Thought*, February 17, 2004).
6. Even "poetry," as George Thomson explains, which historically has been the most nonmimetic of the cultural arts, produces "a closer communion of imaginative sympathy" (*Marxism* 23), which as much as it may express a "weakness in the face of nature" (24), yet "succeed[s] to some extent in overcoming it" (24) to the extent that it serves to focus on and to clarify the "subjective aspect" (29) of labor, that is, "the inner, psychical struggle" (29) labor produces in the worker.
7. All quotations from "Before the Law" are taken from, Franz Kafka, *Wedding Preparations in the Country and Other Stories*.

#### 4 CULTURAL THEORY AFTER THE CONTEMPORARY

1. This cultural opportunism is so popular on the left that some represent materialism itself as an "oscillation." In Peter Hitchcock's *Oscillate Wildly*, for example, materialism names a mode of analysis that isolates the cultural from the social, the superstructure from the base, and thus always arrives at "'a problem, whose solution is always a unique, ad-hoc invention'" (quoting Jameson, *Late Marxism* 9).
2. Deconstruction, at least for those who consider it to be a rigorously philosophical engagement with the canonical texts of Western culture, has been understood to consist of two closely related conceptual moves: the "dehierarchization" of all binaries as instances of the "logocentrism" of Western metaphysics and the "reinscription" of knowledge as a purely

epistemological matter (Gasché). In these terms, “there is no(thing) outside (the) text” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*) to fix meanings, or, in other words, no extra-discursive real that would serve to anchor the “free play” of signification (*différance*) and secure positive and reliable knowledge. By making intelligibility a matter of the interior of language, deconstruction reduces the social relations outside of language to the “extra-discursive” and thereby returns to an eighteenth-century view of matter as that which is opaque to consciousness, rather than understand matter in terms of its self-movement and development. In cultural theory more broadly, the “extra-discursive” is made a language effect, as in the writings of Laclau and Mouffe who argue that, “‘Society’ is not a valid object of discourse . . . there is no single principle fixing—and hence constituting—the whole field of differences” (*Hegemony* 111).

3. See Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, and, for a critique of this position, Zavarzadeh, “Post-ality: The (Dis)simulations of Cyber-Capitalism.”
4. Saying that ideology has the power to create reality is like when Pierre Bourdieu says that “class as it is observed is . . . the product of the theoretical effect of Marx’s work” (*Other Words* 18) because “the symbolic order . . . is the condition of the functioning of the economic order” (*Acts* 82). Because Marxism is assumed to dominate the discussion of class, the deconstruction of Marxist theory is made the precondition for ending inequality. This is similar to the way that the conservative right and the corporate media in the United States turn class into an effect of the rhetoric of “class warfare” on the part of those pushing for policies to improve the lives of the working class.
5. See “Pierre Bourdieu as New Global Intellectual for Capital” (Tumino, *The Red Critique* 6 September/October 2002).
6. Derrida, Negri, Žižek, Agamben, and Naomi Reed, to name just a few, all give versions of this reading.
7. Sterne argues that cultural studies can no longer expect students or citizens to engage in critique because they are too exhausted by work and therefore have a right to pleasure undisturbed by broader considerations:

One reason that Americans watch so much TV is that it’s easy to do after a long and draining day or work. Instead of criticizing the paucity of leisure time left over after the ever-extending work-day . . . Budd, Entman, and Stienman want to put their subjects right back to work for social change. Sure, that would be nice, but I suspect that many of their subjects are tired and drained, and not particularly in the mood to foment revolution in their sparse evening hours. Though Fiske has given up on significant social changes, he at least builds affect into his theory of culture: people watch TV or listen to music because it brings them pleasure. Given that so many people hate their jobs, we ought to take that seriously. To take it seriously, we need to treat “doing nothing” as a worthwhile practice in itself. (97)

8. Janice Peck also concludes that cultural studies suffers from an unquestioned “economism” despite its own opposition to the base/superstructure theory of classical Marxism most notably in the writings of Stuart Hall. She argues that cultural studies has separated culture from production to such an extent that it is unable to question the economic function of culture and so reproduces its logic in a reified form by treating culture as a thing in itself that determines society independently of social agency. It is interesting as well as indicative of the state of cultural studies that while Sterne complains of the “instrumentalism” of cultural studies, which he seems to see as a form of economism, Peck takes issue with its lack of economics and how this carries an economist presupposition about the effectivity of culture. Peck, however, goes back to Williams’ account of mode of production as a corrective to the culturalism of cultural studies, which is to say she goes back to the very texts that have discredited the base/superstructure analytic as “economism” in the Birmingham school of cultural studies.





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